knocking on the door of unhappiness

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by MarionetteFtHJM

Summary

“I had been right, I was still right, I was always right. I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so?”
— Albert Camus, The Stranger

Bucky has spent his youth living life with an expiration date; letting his impulses lead, taking for granted what he had, uncaring of what others thought about him. But now that his shelf life was seemingly over, he has to think about what comes next. And worse yet, he has to do it all on his own.

Notes

Disclaimer as always!!! This is purely based on the fictional portrayals of Bucky and Buck and has nothing to do with the real people who inspired the show!

I'm not gonna sugarcoat it for ya, the first like 12k of this is just John getting settled in and going through yearning of epic proportions.
I have been working on and off on this for like two weeks now between my finals and stuff so the second chapter might take a bit to come out though rest assured it's gonna be out eventually!
Enjoy the first part of John Going Through It the fic !

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saying goodbye to Gale on that airstrip in Kearney, Nebraska, had to have been one of the worst moments in John's life.

Even with everything that he's been through – the rough missions, Africa, the Stalag, the marching in the dead of night – looking into Gale's eyes and knowing this is where they parted ways had left him feeling emptier than endless months spent cold and starved. Looking into those blues, finally warm and well-fed, *alive,* and saying *'I'll see you around, Buck'* and knowing he's lying had taken something out of him. Because at least in the Stalag, he had Buck with him. He could glance over to the other bunk on sleepless nights and know he'd find Gale there, soundly asleep or at least pretending to be. He could walk outside and see Gale in all his commanding glory, hands on his hips as he instructed their men, and bother him for a scrap of attention. Even during the worst of his own state, he could turn to Gale, could count on him.

But that was all over now, the war was done and they'd made it back home to the States, back to their lives and wives-to-be.

'*I'll see you for the wedding, remember?'* Gale had smiled at him, the wide one that made the bow of his top lip disappear as it stretched to show pearly whites. Such a sweet grin delivering possibly the only other sentence that John dreaded as much as the *goodbye*.

John hadn't cried then. He'd smiled right back and clasped Buck's forearm, tugged him into a fierce hug that lasted a little too long and yet not long enough. Before he knew it, Buck was waving him off and turning to board a plane that'd take him to Wyoming, leaving John and their friendship behind.

Only when he was back in Wisconsin by mid-August, in the safety of the mostly-empty house on the outskirts of Manitowoc where his grandma lives, did he let the tears fall.

It felt cathartic. It felt like he was finally allowed to let it all out, to mourn for everyone they'd lost. To cry for everyone that had died in the pursuit of freedom. For everyone who didn't make it out, for the

people he'll never see again. For his and Gale's friendship, for something that he could never have, for the way his heart ached at the distance between them now. It was like he was back in London, in that payphone. Back when Red had told him about Buck going down, his entire world collapsing in on itself. Except Gale was safe and sound with his fiancé somewhere in Casper, Wyoming, and John was in his grandmother's house, alone.

He cried for days, on and off; every time the urge struck him, he would just let it go, let the tears fall. His grandma was worried but she never said anything. She was old and mostly just happy to have him back home, but she was never one to bring the war up at all. It was like it'd never happened, like John had gone on a trip abroad for a few years before returning to her a new man. Like he hadn't faced the worst that mankind had to offer and come out on the other side alive. He didn't want to upset her so he didn't bring it up either, he just went about his days like he had before the war.

He doesn't do much in those first few weeks. The house is as he remembers it from childhood which helps establish the routine. He goes to town to see if any of his old friends are still around (they're not), goes to bars and to the store. He fixes up the fence around the house, befriends the cat in the barn out back and tries to get the old pickup working. But the thing hasn't run since his grandpa died so he's less successful on that part. It's a project, though. It's something to do, something to keep him busy. He helps around the house, helps cook lunch and dinner because sweet old Beth can't move as good as she used to, can't lift the pot if it's too heavy. He watches as her already-frail constitution worsens, as she gets more ill by each new, overly-warm day.

He's sitting in the hospital next to her bed when she finally breaks the status quo they've had on the topic of the war.

"You're different, Johnny." She croons through a cough, a weak hand lifting to his face. "Look just like your grandfather when he came back."

It doesn't seem like a compliment. It doesn't seem like a good thing because his grandpa had been a neurotic man when he'd still been alive; jumpy, easily agitated and hollowed out from the inside – *a dead man walking*, his mom used to say.

"I'm sorry," He apologizes because he doesn't know what else would be appropriate, especially considering the comparison makes him feel

slightly ill.

She shakes her head, a sad smile gracing her wrinkled features. “I’m glad you came back. No saying sorry for that. I just hoped that-” She starts coughing, the breath rattling inside her chest in a wheeze and John rushes up. He brings her a cup of water and she takes a slow sip, laying back down once the fit had subsided.

“Easy, easy.” He warns and she waves him off.

“Hoped it’d be different. When you wrote from Texas, you sounded happy. Like you’d finally found a place to fit in. And you wrote about your friends.” Another cough, shorter this time, just a warning for the future.

His chest constricts at the reminder of the time before, of first laying eyes on Gale specifically.

He’d been so shy, younger than John himself. Still gangly and wide-eyed, big blues staring up at Bucky, darting from his proffered hand to his smooth face before taking the handshake gingerly. It’d taken a while for the other to warm up to him, especially after he’d – in a fit of nervous rambling – blurted out the whole *Buck from back home* thing and then doubled down on the nickname. Gale had been skittish, sure, but there’s always been a fire in him that had drawn John in, something under the surface that he wanted to see more of. So he’d latched onto him and hadn’t let go, hadn’t planned on ever doing so.

Well, up until that day back in Nebraska at least. The moment where he hadn’t had a choice in the matter, where he had to finally set Buck free.

“Such a sad look, John.” His grandma cups his cheek again, runs a trembling thumb under his eye. “I should have written you, wish they’d told me about – about the camp.”

He shakes his head, frowning. “No. No, it’s fine. With your hands, and – and it’s better you didn’t know about the rest anyway.”

Despite how shitty he’d felt not getting anything on mail days, how he’d lashed out at Gale from time to time because of it, it was for the better. He doesn’t think Beth would have lasted as long if she’d known where he was, what kind of danger he was in. Looking back, he doesn’t think he could’ve handled it any better *had* there been anyone waiting for him back in the States. Hell, this is why Gale has always

been a stronger man than he. Because where John would have crumbled under the thought that he was disappointing someone, Gale had found it an anchor. He'd found the will to fight buried between the lines of Marge's neat writing and he kept going until he got out.

"I'm happy you came home," She pats his cheek one last time before letting her hand drop, tired.

"Yeah, me too."

He is. He really, *really* is. But at the same time, he still feels stuck. He feels like he never left the Stalag, like he left everything that he was *before* in that damned camp. Something in him had been broken and he didn't think it could ever be put back together again. He was like the old pickup; rusted from the inside, crossed wiring, rubber tubes gnawed on by time and rats, all of his parts there but cracked and overused.

Beth passes away a month after he'd come back. She passes quietly in the night, in the hospital bed, and he's called in the morning to pick up her possessions and arrange for a funeral home.

The funeral itself if a quiet affair, the only other living relative there being John's somewhat-estranged sister and her husband. The coffin is lowered into the ground in the presence of them and some of the younger neighbors who'd come to give him their condolences, no priest, no ceremony to it. There is no wake either, he doesn't want people in the house. Hitching a ride with the closest neighbors, he arrives alone. He doesn't think anyone's followed after him but his sister and her husband show up just as he's unlocking the door.

There's distaste in the way she eyes the dusty house, nose scrunched up, and he remembers abruptly why he'd never gotten along with her. Remembers how she'd left Beth by her lonesome for all these years.

"You're getting the property, I take it?" She's lost her drawl somewhere in the last six years since he'd seen her, affected a new sort of accent that's carefully neutral.

He shrugs, "You got any objections?"

"No," A snort leaves her as she motions out the back door to the large outdoor space. "What would I do with all of this? And in such a sorry state, too."

"Marlene," He pinches the bridge of his nose. "If you don't got

anything constructive to add, I'll see you at the will reading."

She looks at him oddly then, a tilt to her head as she takes all of him in. The shabby state of his black suit, the scuffed shoes, the stubble he'd let grow on his face – he know he looks like he hasn't slept in weeks. Compared to her black dress and neatly done-up bun, he's a mess.

"I guess it's true what they say about war changing people." Marlene finally settles on saying, a tight smile gracing her features. "I'm glad you're back, *Bucky*."

"Yeah, *Marley*, you sure sound like it." He rolls his eyes and ushers her out of the house, holding his arm out and waving briefly to her husband who had been dutifully waiting by the car. He's not going to say anything. Marlene was lucky; her husband had been declared unfit for duty on the count of his *supposed* epilepsy so she'd never had to worry. Unlike Beth, may her soul rest in peace, who'd probably spent more time than he'd have liked praying on John's behalf.

He tries not to resent her. Tries not to let it get to him but her husband's smarmy expression makes him feel just a tad violent. *They don't know a damn thing.* They can turn their noses up at him all they want, but John's the only one out of the three of them that knows the weight of a human life, the price of their continued peaceful existence.

He tightens his grip on the doorknob and tries not to slam the door as their car pulls away.

John inherits the house and all that's in it, the property, the money his grandma had saved away and interestingly, a horse that one of the neighbors had been looking after. The property itself once used to house a small cattle ranch of which he'd only heard stories. He'd seen the barn, it's dilapidated but it has a fair bit of free pasture to offer around it, the grass growing tall despite his efforts. He doesn't know what he'll do with all of this but he's not ready to sell it yet, if that's ever even going to be an option.

"You're keeping it?" Marlene raises an eyebrow at him and he taps his fingers against the café's lacquered table.

"Yes."

"Why?" She asks like she can't possibly fathom wanting to stay in such a house. The building might be old and drafty, but John's still got fond memories of when he used to visit. He's still attached to the way

the old wooden furniture smells and to how the birds wake him up in the morning.

He shrugs, “Don’t know. I like it here. And besides, I’d have to fix it all up if I was gonna sell it.”

“I thought you’d move to the city,” She takes a sip of her coffee, well-manicured nails a stark red against the porcelain of the cup. “Maybe get a job.”

“*Marley*,” He warns with a scoff. “You’ve done well keeping your nose out my business the last six years, I’d appreciate it if you continued doing so.”

“You’re right,” She grimaces. “None of my concern what you do with your time.”

“Glad we’re in agreement.” There’s never been a day in his life that they’ve been *in agreement* about anything and this might really be unprecedented. Ever since they were kids, they’ve been at each other’s throats which makes this quite the monumental occasion. He itches for a smoke and a drink. It’s been a while since he’s had either due to his grandma’s condition near the end. He hadn’t wanted to risk it, didn’t want to be a burden any more than he already was. But he think he might just get drunk tonight.

Marlene puts down enough money to cover both coffees and sighs, stowing her wallet back in her purse. “Send me a letter if you need anything, John. I mean it.”

Taken aback by the offer, he just nods mutely. That is *unexpected* to say the least. Maybe six years was enough for her to change her mind about keeping in touch. Maybe it’s John who’s changed enough for her to want to throw him a bone. It’s a bitter thing, feeling like you’re being pitied.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He smiles tightly, polite more than genuine. “See you around, Marley.”

“See ya, Bucky.”

She leaves the café with a jangle of the bell above the door and he’s left to stare at the sludge in his cup hardly worth being called coffee. He buys a bottle of scotch from the general store on his way back.

He gets roaring drunk like he hasn’t since that night they announced

the end of the war. He gets drunk and cries and sits down to sloppily pen a letter to Gale, desperate and lonely and missing the other like a lost limb.

Dear Gale, he writes, a cheesy line but a classic one, before crossing it out and replacing it with: *Dear Buck,* not wanting to give him the smug satisfaction of having used his given name.

How have you been keeping? I've been doing good! Except for when I haven't because my grandma died a few days ago so now I'm sad, you know. Left me in this big house all by my lonesome, but I hear there's a horse somewhere in my possession now, too. So, guess that's about to change. Look at me, a homeowner. I don't know anything about horses or owning a house so this is gonna be interesting. I'm sure I got this in the bag, don't worry! I wanted to try and call but I don't know if they have landlines up in Wyoming, you see. So we're back to letters. Maybe this time, I get one back. Say hi to Marge for me.

Missing you,

Bucky.

He'd looked at his handiwork all proud-like even though the words resembled alphabet soup more than anything legible and were smudged where his hand had dragged over what he'd just written. But he still sealed that envelope, still wrote down the address he's had memorized since basic and tossed it with all his bills and utilities that had to be sent out in the morning before passing out on the couch.

If he never hears another word about his supposed *heroism* from the people he encounters around town, it'll be too soon.

Each new praise directed at his acts as pilot, each salute thrown his way, each reminder of his veteran status – even the unemployment compensation – it all makes him angry. It all forces the thoughts of war to the forefront of his mind, forces him to remember what he'd gone through.

The nightmares start once he's finally relaxed enough to sleep properly. And when they do*, they don't fucking stop*.

They're the standard fanfare as far as he can tell from talking to the vets from the previous war around town – *World War One* as they've called it, and isn't that something? That there's been two of them now. He dreams of the gunfire, the flak fire, Forts going down, the endless

days of slog in the Stalag. It's all normal, they tell him, it'll become bearable after a while. Nobody says it'll go away and he's not naïve enough to think that they're ever going to be entirely gone, but they promise progress even though it doesn't seem possible at the moment.

What's not standard, however, is the dreams he has of Gale. Of Buck leaving him behind, of Buck being shot right in front of him – body hitting the ground with a dull thud, the life leaving his eyes, complexion paling. The flak fire and the dredging through several feet of snow he can deal with, he can wake up, down a glass of scotch and be fine with continuing his day as he usually would. But the ones of Gale dying, those - those leave him shaking and trembling for hours after. And he knows why. John knows that he still doesn't care enough whether he lives or dies but the thought of losing Gale – really, *truly* losing him in a way that's permanent – *he can't handle that.* It's because Gale isn't next to him, he can't reach over and check to see if he's still alive. Hasn't heard from him at all since Nebraska – since they parted ways and it had felt so final to John despite the cheer in the other's eyes.

He spends more time on his back porch nursing beers than he'd like to admit.

And when even that doesn't settle him, he ambles about the property, eying things that need to be fixed or torn down. There's a shed that houses old, rusted gardening tools that should be tossed out, the wood of the walls crumbling and pockmarked by age and termites. There's the old barn with a new hole in the roof that needs to be patched; it houses a bunch of moldy hay – dampened by rainfall and left in the dark – which he should either burn or spread across the pasture out back to compost and be absorbed by the soil. The barn also holds pens where livestock used to live and upon further inspection, only one of them is still in a serviceable state. He assumes that this is where the horse was kept before it was placed with the neighbors for safe keeping. He should *probably* deal with that as well.

The truck remains motionless no matter how many hours he spends under the hood, banging away at parts that look like they're out of place. It stubbornly clings to its inertia, shedding layers of dust and rust with his rattling but all for nothing. Much like John himself, it's letting time and the weather consume it.

He makes himself deal with the horse first.

"What is it?!" A gruff voice asks from behind the door he'd previously

knocked on.

“Uh,” He looks around at the obviously tended-to garden, the roses still blooming despite the near-sweltering heat, the mailbox with the flag up and wonders why the man appears so irate. “It’s John Egan, Sir. A lawyer spoke to you earlier last week, about the horse?”

The door opens and John meets eyes with a short, portly man that has a mighty mustache on his face. He’s running a hand over it as he takes John in, contemplative.

“Beth’s boy?” The man asks and he nods.

“That’d be me,” John tries for a grin but the man just *harrumphs* comically before motioning him inside, undeterred in his sour mood.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” The man says, “Beth always had something nice to say about everybody.”

“Yeah, she was kind like that.” His smile tightens as he feels the grief pour icily over him.

He’s still sad about it. Of course he is. But loss is nothing new to him. It’s something he lives with every day, something he’s lived with since the damned war started and he was shipped off to England.

“Martin? Marty, who was that?” A woman’s voice reaches them, cheerful and melodic. The man, *Martin* apparently, grumbles and steers them towards the kitchen.

“Don’t shout, Peg, we’re here.”

“*We*? Oh!” The gray-haired woman in a sundress, *Peg*, turns around with a startled yelp. “I didn’t know we had company!” She pats her apron down and rushes over to offer him a hand.

“Beth’s boy, John.” Marty hums, “Here about the horse.”

“Oh, dearie,” She looks up at him with a wobbly smile as she takes his cheeks between her palms. “I’m sorry for your loss, sweetheart. Beth was very welcoming to us when we moved here and I was sad to hear about her passing. I’m sorry we couldn’t make the funeral, one of the heifers was having issues delivering and we needed all hands on deck! Ah, if there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask!”

John shrugs, feeling uncomfortable at the attention, under their

peering gazes and at her rambling words. He chuckles, as gentle as possible as he diverts them from the topic. “Well, right now, I’m only in need of that horse, ma’am.”

“Call me *Peg*, sweetheart.” She pats his cheek lightly before turning around. “I’ll make some lemonade!”

“You’re too much, Peg.” He grins sweetly, the kind of showy kind that usually has every dame swooning and has Peg tittering like he’d just said something funny.

“Come on, then.” Marty shows him out the back door and he follows dutifully. Their backyard is big, even bigger than his property. But unlike his own, it’s well kept with a couple of farmhands tending to the dozen or so heads of cattle grazing at the pasture and the pigsty he can spot in the distance.

“I’m too old to care for ‘er, but Beth was paying one of the farmhands to keep her fed and clean.” Marty explains when they approach the fenced off area. The man puts two fingers into his mouth and lets out a piercing whistle that draws several pairs of eyes.

John spots the horse in the distance turn towards them. It seems like someone’s taking the time to give her the exercise she needs because she’s fully saddled up and looking powerful bathed in the afternoon light heading their way.

“A *Paint*, not many of those around these parts. Don’t know where Beth got her from.” Marty waves the rider over and the horse slows to a trot.

“She’s a beauty,” He admits reluctantly, charmed by the dark brown base with white splotches and a light mane, she’s nothing like any horse he’s seen – not that he’s had the opportunity to meet many. He remembers reading about them serving in the last war, remembers how highly everyone’s always spoken about them. In John’s humble opinion, they seem like a lot of work.

“You called, Marty?” The drawl of the voice reaches him before the rider makes himself seen.

“That’s *Mister Thomson* to you, you hooligan.” Martin grouches but he’s not being mean about it. Whoever this kid is, he’s obviously well-acquainted with the old man.

“Aw, Marty, don’t be like that.” A head pokes from around the horse

as it comes to a halt at the gate. The kid looks to be freshly out of his teens, a boyish smile on his face as the takes the two of them in. Wide, hazel eyes move from Marty to him and he tilts his head, brown hair cascading to the side with the movement.

“Who’s this?”

“Don’t be rude.” Marty clicks his tongue and the kid winces.

“Sorry,” He dismounts from the horse and holds out a hand for John to shake. “Name’s Benjamin Cvjetnik, people usually call me *Benny* or *Ben*.”

Benny. *Benny* is for a scruffy face and wide, dark eyes that peer up at him pointedly when he’s being *too much*. *Benny* is for the bright grin when Meatball’s being particularly rowdy, for when sunglasses slip down a proud nose as a laugh rings through a Fort. *Benny* is for DeMarco only.

“Ben,” He shakes the hand, callused despite the owner’s young age. “John, but most call me *Bucky.”*

“Beth’s grandson.” Ben’s eyes light up and John nods. “What can I do for you?”

“He’s here about *Dice,* Benny.” Marty says, a meaningful inflection to his tone that has Ben faltering.

“Oh.” A crestfallen look washes over Ben’s joyful features and he steps back abruptly, arms crossing over his chest like John had just insulted him. “Her name’s *Eurydice*, not my fault you can’t pronounce it, old man.”

Marty waves him off and begins his retreat back into the house, “Sort yourselves out.”

“That has a lovely ring to it,” He threads lightly because the kid’s eyes are suspiciously shiny and the last thing he wants is to see him cry.

“Beth let me name her.” The guy sniffs. “Said you wouldn’t mind even though she wanted you to do it once you came back.”

His chest aches a little at the sentiment, at how his grandma expected him to be back despite the odds. “She would’a been nameless for a long while if she was kept waiting on me.”

“Well,” The other shrugs. “Glad you like it, since she’s yours now.”

He raises an eyebrow at the other’s words, “Now, I’m sensin’ some animosity here between us, Ben. You wanna talk to me about it?”

He feels like he’s gearing up to giving a stern talking to. Like the new recruits are being too rowdy again; he feels as if Gale’s standing by his side and frowning heavily at the greenhorns, but opting to remain silent - leaving John to do the tongue lashing so he can keep his *ice prince* reputation intact.

The boy’s cheeks heat visibly as he looks away. “Seems a little unfair, if ya’ ask me.”

“That I’m takin’ *my* horse back?” He holds back a chuckle as Ben shuffles closer to *Dice* again, seeking shelter from Bucky’s gaze.

“I’ve been with her since she was a filly. Trained her myself, too. Took care of her when she got a bad horseshoe done, washed her and cleaned her up whenever she got into the mud with the pigs. No disrespect, *Major*, but I don’t think you know much about looking after a horse.” Ben shakes his hair out until it curtains over his face slightly, another barrier between him and the kid.

He stares at the other for a few moments, hands tapping against the warm wood under his palms. “You’re right. Don’t know jack shit about horses. Don’t even know where Beth got her from. But I don’t want ta’ be keeping her here, taking up space when I have a barn out back that’s not getting used.”

The kid’s shoulders slump, already giving up the good fight and John can’t hold back his grin any longer.

“So I’ll have to get educated real fast.” He pauses to see the kid squirm some more before continuing. “That is, unless, I could hire someone to come ‘round every day and take care of her for me.”

Ben’s head snaps up, mouth parted and eyes wide, and for the first time in a while, Bucky feels like he’s doing something *right.* It feels *good* to make someone’s day like this, to do what a kind person would.

“You’d do that, Sir?” Ben approaches the fence again, eager now that the possibility of losing custody of *Dice* isn’t on the table anymore.

“Sure I would. Don’t know if I can give you a raise, but whatever Beth was paying you, I can match that.” He has to look away from the

other's blinding grin as he positively *beams* at John, it's too innocent, untouched by the horrors of war. It's what he had fought for but the reminder is still startling. Ben will never have to know what it's like to stare down the barrel of a gun and expect it to shoot at the slightest movement and that means that they've won.

"Aw, I'd do it from the goodness of my heart, but if yer offerin'." Ben shrugs bashfully.

"Good man," He reaches out a hand for the kid but the horse butts in sniffing at it with a soft sway of her head which makes the both of them laugh. "Bring her around in a couple of days, I need to get the roof patched up."

"I'll be sure to check in with you when I do, Bucky." The other smile curls sweetly and John snorts, finding it funny just how fast the other's switched up on him.

He gives the other a brief salute and heads back inside, feeling a little better about the prospect of having the horse in his back yard now that he knows he won't be its sole keeper. It gives him hope that maybe he'll adjust fine, that he won't always be stuck inside his own head thinking, about things that are no longer in his life (both the war and Buck included).

"Don't fall off, dear!" Peg's voice reaches him as he's hammering away at the part of the roof that he had cleared away earlier in order to replace the boards with new ones.

"Wouldn't dream of it!" He calls back, waving at her.

It's not something he's done before, certainly, but if he survived being a prisoner in Nazi Germany, putting a couple of new planks onto a barn won't be his downfall. Besides, he's always been partial to being up high.

The initial climb had given him a bit of a shock, reminding him keenly of climbing that pole in the camp and tearing down the flag, replacing it with their own. But he'd taken a moment to breathe, to remind himself of where he was and of the job that needed to be done. So he'd powered through it, brave, thinking *look at me now, Gale, completely sane and present.*

"Well, when you're done with that, I brought over some meatloaf so come eat!" Peg shows off the glass dish in his hands and he gives her a

thumbs up.

It takes him half an hour to finish up with the planks and when he's done, he tries not to let the mismatched wood bother him. He doesn't have the funds to redo the entire thing, doesn't have the patience either. The new planks will have to hold and when another hole opens up, he'll fix that one, too. *Ship of Theseus,* or whatever it was that Buck used to say about the Forts that were patched up far too many times to count but still flew their missions dutifully.

He washes up briefly before finding Peg in the kitchen, making mashed potatoes at the old stove.

"I hope you don't mind. I felt bad leaving you just with the meat and no sides." She frets as he sits down, plating the food for him even though he doesn't need the help.

"You didn't have to do all of this, Peg. Really." He sighs, the unease bubbling up from within him. He doesn't necessarily feel like he deserves all of this… *care.* He's just their late neighbor's grandson, they don't know him. It's not pity, he knows that much, but the thought still lingers.

"Oh, it's no bother, Bucky." She pushes a glass of water towards him. "Marty doesn't really have much of an appetite these days and I miss cooking for a lot of people."

"Big family?" He asks because it's the polite thing to do even if he's not sure about this whole *making friends with the neighbors* thing.

"Two daughters and a son," She nods. "They're all grown up now. My girls, Dorothy and Joanna." She pats her apron and pulls a flowery coin pouch out of the pocket there. Then, as the coins rattle inside the cloth, she pulls out two photos. She shows them off proudly and John hums, mouth full.

"This is Dory," She hands him the first photo. The girl in it has a grimace on her face like she's being forced to take the picture at gunpoint. Her hair is fair and braided back, draping over her shoulder. The line of her nose is the same as the other girl's, same as Peg's. "She's married now, moved to Detroit. Has a family of her own, but they're too far to visit often. A shame."

She gives him the other photo as he returns the first one. "Joanna is in university in Chicago. She's studying to be a physicist. She's about your age, I reckon. She'll be back for Christmas. Oh, I can't wait for

you to meet her!"

His throat dries up as he stares at the photo. She's beautiful, really. Same light hair as Dorothy, but her smile is wide and excited. She has glasses on, a cat-eyed frame that fits her face shape well. She's done her makeup for the occasion and he bets the color of her lips is red. He nods to whatever Peg is saying but he's not paying attention. The words *I can't wait for you to meet her* ring inside his head. He hopes to God Peg isn't expecting him to make friends with Joanna, or worse – to try and, *what*? *Go steady* with her? No, *no.* There'll be none of that and he knows, despite Peg's good intentions, his mood's soured.

"Bet she's real smart if she's studying physics. A buddy of mine from the military is into that sort of stuff as well." He smiles tightly, trying to get her off the topic of their potential meeting.

She hesitates before looking down at the purse again. "This, um. You probably understand better than most." She pulls another photo out of the pouch and offers it to him. "This is Michael. He and Joanna were twins."

The photo is of a man in a uniform, as young as him and Buck had been before they'd shipped out. Them being twins is obvious; they're carbon copies of each other. They have the same half-moon eyes and the same high cheekbones, but where Joanna's smile is sunny, Michael's is more subdued in his photo. The past tense doesn't escape John and neither does Peg's tearful expression.

"You know, Marty doesn't like talking about it. Doesn't like remembering. But, um. I still keep him close to me, it's still too soon to forget. He was amongst the first to be shipped out, volunteered. He was a – a paratrooper, died last year." She takes the photo back and thumbs over the line.

He grimaces, remembers hearing vaguely about how the paratroopers helped the rest of the military by putting themselves in the midst of it. He doesn't know what to say because he doesn't want to offer her empty platitudes about *bravery* and *honor,* knows that no matter how readily they all gave their lives for the cause, a loss of a life is still a loss.

"Did Beth ever tell you about…" He motions vaguely to himself, pushing away his empty plate.

Peg shakes her head, putting the photos away and wiping at her eyes. "Said you were a pilot but that's the extent of it."

“Was a prisoner of war far longer than I was in a plane.” He snorts, the bitter edge tinting his tone obvious. He itches for a smoke again, for a drink so he doesn’t have to feel any of this anymore. But she deserves something back, she deserves to know she’s not alone in her grief. Martin obviously has his own ways of coping but Peg – Peg doesn’t seem to be doing well at all. And maybe if he – if he *makes good with the neighbors,* he can make himself feel better about leaving his Grandma like he did. About practically running away and joining up the first chance he got, the moment it looked like he’d have to start living life on his own.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Her face softens, her own pain forgotten momentarily in favor of his.

He shrugs, helpless. “I’m alive because of the fact. That’s all there is to it.”

Because that’s the truth.

He’s alive because he wasn’t in a Fort long enough to get shot down. He’s alive because he wasn’t torn to shreds by flak or swallowed whole by hellfire. He wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t spent those grueling years in the Stalag; because no matter what he wanted to think at the time, he wasn’t invincible. He wasn’t some sort of *hero* sent to lead his men to victory over the greatest Evil in their time. No, he wasn’t fucking – he wasn’t *Rosie the Indomitable.* He was just John. He was just Bucky Egan from Manitowoc, soft around his core and entirely too dependent on Gale Cleven to keep him sane.

“I know I’ve already said, but if you ever need anything…” She trails off, reaching over to grasp one of his hands in both of her weathered ones.

“Don’t worry yourself about me, Peg, I’ve got it all sorted.” He smiles but he can tell that she’s not buying it.

Releasing his hand, she sits back and her eyes clear some – the topic obviously dropped for now. “I came over to tell you that Ben’s bringing the horse tomorrow. It’s awfully kind of you to let ‘im keep taking care of her.”

He shrugs, fiddling with the hem of his shirt and feeling how the sweat has cooled on his back all tacky; John knows he must look a mess, and can’t imagine he smells any better either.

“He looked damn near ready to fight me for her, how could I take her

away?" He chuckles and Peg hides a grin behind her palm. "Besides, I don't know much about horses so it's a win-win."

"Either way," She titters as she stands up, smoothing out the wrinkles from her dress. "Send the baking dish over with him tomorrow. I'll get out of your hair now, dear."

He sees her to the door where she pats his cheek one more time before saying goodbye and heading home.

The moment he's alone, he cracks into what's left of the bottle of scotch. It's not good, it's not even very potent, but it gets the job done. Soon, he's lying on the couch in the dusty living room wondering if he should write Buck another letter. If hearing back from him will stop the dreams. If knowing he's alive and well is going to help any. Or maybe Gale will write him back with a wedding invitation which is somehow even more of a terrifying concept. He doesn't think he could – he knows he said he'd be Buck's best man but… he doesn't think he can do it. Doesn't think he can stand at the altar and watch as Gale marries the girl of his dreams, the one he'd gone back to even though he spent more time with John than he ever has with her.

And if that's a petty thing to think, then so be it.

Howdy, Buck!

He starts the letter, sloppily penning it with his head in his hand, sitting on the ground at the coffee table.

How many horses does it take to make a cowboy? Is one enough? Her names Eurydice, real fancy! Hope you got my last letter, since I got no reply and all. Do I need cows to be a cowboy? I could get some, I have the land now. I think the cat in the barn is having kittens, it's getting real busy around here. I think Peg wants to set me up with her daughter. Didn't you say you want to go back to studying physics? Sometimes I dream about you dying and I need to know you're alive. Say hi to the loveliest Marge for me!

Your newly-minted rancher,

Bucky.

Even though the letter is perhaps messier than the last one, he still seals it in an envelope to be sent out eventually. He thinks about making it smell like his aftershave – like Marge would perfume all of hers. He thinks about it and tries getting up, but before he can do that,

sleep overtakes him, landing him on the old carpet.

The sound of hooves thudding against the ground rouses him from where he's been trying sleep off a hangover. He's lying in the swing on his back porch with an arm thrown over his eyes, ignoring the gurgling of his stomach and the sun beaming down at him. He couldn't even gather enough strength to make himself coffee when he got up, opting to just try existing instead.

"Beautiful morning, ain't it?" Ben's voice is accompanied by a mighty neigh from *Dice*.

"Sure is," He groans at the other's tone; loud and chipper like he knows just how painful Bucky's head is.

"If you'd rather continue dozin', I can get *Eurydice* settled myself." The farmhand offers, kind and understanding if a little mocking around the corners of his smile.

"No, no. I'll show you to the barn, come on." He forces himself upwards and takes a moment's pause in order for the nausea to pass, breathing deeply. He pats the horse's flank and the muscle twitches under his palm, calm despite not knowing him, well-trained.

He leads them further into the back yard. The building is situated across the pasture, far away from the house that it's a bit of a walk but not enough to get sweaty. That is, it *wouldn't be* if John were entirely sober. But, seeing as he's still *recovering*, he's sweating bullets by the time they reach the chipped white walls.

"Could have given you a ride," Ben teases as John pushes open the door with some effort.

"Funny, kid." He huffs and Ben nudges *Dice* inside, eyeing the pens still in disrepair.

"Hey, I'm almost twenty years old." The other complains as he dismounts the horse and lets her get acquainted with her new-old home.

He pauses at that – older than John had initially assumed, almost old enough to have fought.

"You dodge the draft?" He watches as the other runs his hand over *Dice's* head lovingly before feeding her a sugar cube for good

behavior.

“Did basic,” Ben shrugs, rubbing a hand over the back of his head. “War ended so we were discharged. I could’ve stuck around but I… you know, military life wasn’t for me.”

“First train outta there, huh?” He grins, patting the guy on the back and Ben’s cheeks flush.

“No place like Wisconsin,” The other chuckles, ducking his head to avoid John’s eyes. He’s got a fair bit of height on Ben so it’s hard to try and maintain eye contact when the other doesn’t want it. And it makes him a little sad that he’s apparently become intimidating over time. That he was no longer seen as easy-going, as someone who laughs and jokes around. This is what he’s become in that camp, this is the John *worth knowing* as Buck had put it.

“Want something to drink?” He offers for the lack of a common topic and Ben shakes his head.

“Not right now, I gotta give her a good brushing. I’ll pop in later, though.” The other promises with a timid smile and he nods, biting his bottom lip, wondering why making friends is suddenly so *difficult*.

The walk back to the house is as equally grueling as the walk to the barn was. He decides to switch out his shirt for a tank top, but not before having a cool shower. The water soothes some of the aches away and he ends up running his hands over his ribs until he stops feeling *everything* so much.

He finally manages to make himself a cup of Joe. Like always, the coffee washes most of the hangover away and he’s left sorting through the mail.

Surprisingly, he finds a letter from Crosby in there. His heart thuds in his chest, fondness spreading underneath his ribcage at being remembered.

The letter is a photo of Croz, his wife Jean, their kid and oddly enough, Rosenthal.

To our dear Bucky, the back of the photo reads. The penmanship is neat and tidy, not something either Rosie or Croz are capable of.

We were talking about how great you are over a bottle of gin and thought you might want some way to keep in contact. We got a landline up in New

York so feel free to ring us anytime!

Hugs and kisses,

Croz, Jean and Rosie

He thumbs over the number and writes it down on a separate piece of paper to be slotted in with other important addresses and numbers that his grandma kept. He puts the photo into a frame immediately, taking a sketch of him as a kid that his ma did out and shoving it into a drawer – not liking the way staring at the depiction of his own innocent smile is making him feel (like his world is narrowing down around him, like he's lost something he'll never get back).

Looking at the three of them and the baby in Jean's arms makes him feel something else, though. It's reawakened that part of him that aches for a family of his own, for someone to be there next to him, for that someone that'll make his days better and worth living. That used to be Gale. That used to be Buck back in the Stalag, but Buck's not here now. Instead, all John has is an empty house, an empty backyard and a horse.

Ben walks in through the back door sometime around noon while John is trying to whip up a late breakfast of eggs and bacon. Even though their best meals at Thorpe Abbotts always preceded a mission, he's starting to miss the cafeteria cooking.

"She's out grazing," Ben heads for the sink, washing his hands before drying them on the backs of his denims. "Lots of ground to cover, doesn't look like it's been mowed too often."

"Yeah, I gave it a whack when I first got here but time got away from me." He shrugs then motions to the fridge. "Help yourself, there's beer and orange juice."

"If you want, I can take on the mowing as well." Ben takes out the carton of orange juice and John gets a glass for him. "I also gotta see if Marty will part with some of his hay until I can contact a seller."

"Whatever you need, I'll foot the bill." He promises, hoping that Ben won't hesitate if something has to be done. He plates two portions of scrambled eggs and bacon and serves the other before he takes a seat.

"Oh, you didn't have to." Ben flounders, looking unsure.

He rolls his eyes, "If you're gonna be workin' for me, I'm gonna try

and feed ya'."

A genuine smile steals over the other's expression as he picks up the fork. "Beth used to say the same thing. Would always have cookies ready when I came to pick up my pay for the week."

"Well, I can't promise I'm much of a baker, but I can have a cup of coffee or a mediocre lunch for you once in a while."

The eggs and bacon aren't bad and they eat in companionable silence, forks scraping the plate when there's no more food left. It's not really a stellar meal but John hasn't had much of an appetite in months now, and even though he's put some of his pre-Stalag weight back on, he's still not there.

Something about his train of thought must show on his face because Ben frowns at him, leaning in closer.

"Something wrong?"

He snorts because, *really*? Is anything *right*? But he's not going to crack open this topic again. Yesterday with Peg was more than enough for a whole 'nother month. He doesn't need to be thinking about this – not when the nightmares are still persistent.

"Damn, guess I'll have to start buying recipe books, now." He cracks a smile instead and the tension leaves Ben's shoulders, accepting the excuse easily, trusting John.

"Beth kept one of her own in the drawer under the silverware." Ben points to one of the kitchen cupboards.

He raises an eyebrow but stands up to check either way. And sure enough, the lowest drawer holds a few dish rags and on top of them, a hardcover notebook that's brimming with stray papers and yellowed at the edges. He runs his thumb over the familiar writing and smiles, remembering all the Christmas cards Beth used to send him, all the little notes she used to leave around the house for chores that needed to be doing when he'd spend his summers here. Rounded letters, slanted but neat as any woman's handwriting.

Ben clears his throat and John remembers that he's not alone for once. He puts the notebook on the table and turns to look at the other.

"I'll be heading out now," Ben smiles gently and points his thumb at the door behind him. "Still some work to do at Marty's before I head

for the city."

"You live in town?"

"Me an' ma." He nods with a shrug. "I take the bus in the morning and evening. A bit of a commute but worth it."

It's an odd thing for a city kid to do, to distance himself from somewhere where the opportunities are seemingly endless and latch himself to the farm life instead. If anything, he would have had a better time working at the shipyard or in a butcher shop at the market. But, knowing the kid as little as he does, he can't really make that judgment. Maybe Ben just likes working with animals.

"Well, if you're ever too tired to take the bus back, I'm sure we could find a spare room for you here." He offers because it seems like the polite thing to do, because working at Marty's ranch and then walking a few miles to get to Bucky's horse can't be easy.

"I appreciate that," Ben grins and gives him a mocking little salute. "See ya' tomorrow, Bucky."

"Can you grab the mail off the coffee table and shove it into the box on your way out?"

He had penned his sister a letter earlier in the week and hadn't sent it yet. If she was serious about keeping in touch, this will be a good way to test it. If she writes back responding to his inquiry about whether or not she needed the baby clothes he'd found in a box in the attic seems as good an way to test the waters.

"Sure thing!" Ben huddles away and John's attention is drawn back to the notebook. Well, he supposes he has all the time in the world to practice making food now. It's a good a hobby as any. And if he's going to be feeding Ben on occasion, too, then he better get to it quick.

"*Crosby residence, Harry speaking, how may I help you?"*

"Awfully formal there, Croz."

"*Wh- Bucky*!" The other's voice draws away from the speaker and he hears a shout of: *Jean, it's Bucky!*

"I didn't know me calling was such a monumental occasion." He feels

bashful, having someone looking forward to hearing from him is a strange experience – especially now after everything when most men, him included, expected to end up becoming a memory.

"*You kidding?*" Croz croons, "*We've been waitin' for this for days now*."

"It's almost like I'm a film star," He leans against the phone booth side, smiling.

It had been a rough night. A storm had swept through Wisconsin and he'd ended up in the barn while the wind howled through the creaky boards, huddled by *Eurydice's* side to make sure she's alright. The horse had been fine, if a little perplexed, but just having something living next to him had helped John himself with getting through the night – with reminding himself he wasn't in a fort as thunder crackled across the night sky. There were no horses at Thorpe Abbotts, there were no horses in the Stalag. And *Dice* had been sweet, breaths huffing and softly swaying into Bucky's hand when he had to reassure himself that they were both alive. He'd ended up falling asleep briefly and woke up to gentle nudging of her nose against the top of his head. The storm had passed by then and he had given her an apple before retreating into the house to wash off the stink from his skin and change his clothes.

"How'd you get my address anyway?"

Croz clears his throat and chuckles faintly, "*I had to call up all the way to Kearny*."

"Damn, Croz, you a detective now? I'm impressed." The fact that that had taken some effort on the other's part doesn't escape him. Croz had put in the work to get his address, to go out and take that photo with Jean, their kid, and Rosie. Something in him thaws at that, pleased that he had become friendly enough to be missed with the two men who'd taken good care of Buck once he'd gotten back to England.

"*Say hi*," He hears the near-silent instruction from somewhere to Croz's side and grins, fiddling with the telephone cord.

"*Jean says hi,"* Croz's voice is filled with affection that makes Bucky ache for such a familiarity.

"Ahh, the head of the house." He drawls, "Looking forward to meeting her someday, hope she knows."

"*You're not putting the moves on my wife, Bucky*." Croz's admonishment

is followed by giggles from both him and his wife and Bucky is *so* happy he paid the bus fare to go into town. "*I wouldn't be able to handle losing to you.*"

There's a gasped little *Harry!* from beyond the line and more laughter that has Bucky grinning like a loon.

"Naw, don't worry about it. I'd never." He swears and Croz grumbles in turn.

"*You say that now, but if you saw her in person*." The other's statement is followed by a sweet coo from the man's wife and Bucky *wishes* so viscerally.

He's glad he called but being in the presence – even over telephone – of a happily married couple is making him think about Gale and Marge and how the two always looked picture-perfect together. Still, he's not going to let his own *yearning* ruin anybody else's day.

"You all doing alright?" He eyes the elderly woman outside the booth standing there and tapping her foot impatiently – as if the booth John's in is the only one in town.

"*Yeah, yeah. Bit of an adjustment but we're doing good. Trying to get into the swing of things*." Croz's shrug is audible and John can easily imagine wide, brown eyes squinted around a smile.

"That's good to hear," He hums, a weight easing off his shoulders.

"*How about you and Buck*?"

The question pierces through Bucky's brain like a .45 cal.

John's stomach drops through his soles, the air he sucks in making him cough, spluttering. He squeezes his eyes closed and wishes the woman outside would just *leave*.

"*Bucky?"* Croz's voice has gone high and panicked, trying to catch his attention.

"What, uh, what do you mean?" He finally manages to croak out after a few moments catching his breath.

"*Well…"* Crosby trails off, sounding unsure now. "*We all sorta assumed the two of you would, you know, stick together after?*"

"No, um. No, I haven't actually heard from him since we parted

ways."

And it hurts. It hurts to admit that. It hurts that even if Gale hadn't known his address, if John hadn't written it onto a piece of paper and slipped it inside the other's pocket, he hadn't put in the effort to seek John out. Croz had done it, Croz had gone above what was necessary and send John a photo of his family (plus Rosie) because they'd been talking about him and wanted to hear from him. Because he matters to them. And that's it, isn't it? *He doesn't matter to Buck*.

John always did fear that if it weren't for him clinging to Gale with both hands, making himself known and present and being a nuisance, they never would have been friends. Too different, the complete opposites where it mattered, too much of Gale's father in Bucky – the drinking, the gambling, the sleeping around from before the Stalag.

He's going to – *he needs to calm down*.

"*That's odd…"* Croz trails off, his hand coming to muffle the receiver while he has a hurried exchange with his wife. "*I'm sure he's been busy settling in. He'll write you soon enough!"*

The optimism in the other's voice is too forced, too put-upon for John's sake. His smile is sad as he taps his fingers against the box of the telephone.

"It's alright, Croz. I'm sure he will. Listen," He makes eye-contact with the woman who's still somehow there. "I gotta go, but I'll call again next week, round the same time. Deal?"

"*Sure, yes. Of course! Talk to you then, Bucky*!" Crosby gets out with a relieved sigh and Jean echoes it with a soft *Bye, Bucky!* Before John hangs up.

He steadily avoids looking at the woman again as he makes his way to the nearest general store for a new bottle to crack into once the sun's gone down.

Do you hate me? I was just wonderin' since you haven't written me yet. I think I would, if I were you. You're trying to live your life and here I am houndin' you for a word. I'm sorry, hope you're doing well.

He scrunches up the paper and throws it into the ashy fireplace, watches it bounce off the stone as he takes a gulp from the half-empty bottle of something cheap and piss-poor. This one's not getting mailed

or getting finished. The last one shouldn't have either. Or the first one, for that matter.

He feels a lump forming in his throat as he hastily unfolds the paper and scribbles on it.

Wasn't I enough?

And in the morning, with his head pounding and his stomach roiling as he looks at the paper, he wishes Gale's silence didn't affect him as much. He wishes he could just move on, live with his nightmares and his horse and be fine with it. But Gale's still a fresh wound oozing blood, still raw and shiny. He takes the paper to the fireplace and sets it alight with his zippo, letting it burn into ash with the remnants of the wood there.

Pathetic, he feels pathetic.

"I swear you won't fall off!" Ben whines, leading *Dice* in a tight circle in front of the barn.

"Nope," he shakes his head, vehement in his refusal.

"How are you gonna own a horse and not try and ride it!" The other cackles and nudges *Dice* up on her hind legs which she does with a mighty neigh.

John's gut clenches with fear for Ben, knees locking together as the horse thuds back onto all fours. She still looks stunning, even against the bright September sky which had begun growing darker sooner than he would have liked. Though, a beautiful horse doesn't immediately mean that he'd like to try and get up in the saddle.

"I'm more than happy to sit back and enjoy just lookin' at her." He shrugs, hopping up to balance precariously on the fence.

"You can fly a plane into enemy territory but not get on a horse?" Ben rises an eyebrow and Bucky shrugs.

"Plane's don't have a mind of their own." He points out just as *Eurydice* kicks out with her hind legs a little against some of the taller grass stalks bothering her. "Sides, I have a whole crew backing me up when I'm in a Fort."

"I could always ride behind you, if you're scared." Ben has the

audacity to wink at him and it's so cheeky that the laugh bursts out of John unrestrained. He throws his head back with it and when he glances at Ben, he finds him looking a little huffy.

"I'm fine keeping both my feet on the ground, but thanks for the offer, kid." Grinning, he salutes Ben and turns to make for the house.

"Still not a kid!"

"Come by for lunch when you're done!"

Over the course of the past month, he'd done his very best to try out some of Beth's recipes. He'd gone into town, list in hand, and got everything that he needed for a few of them. Some of them seemed easy enough: meatloaf, a simple roast and some vegetables, tomato hamburger soup – those were pretty straightforward. But Beth had some zingers in there that he hadn't had in ages and would like to try his hand at making, no matter how ill-advised a move that might be. Like the goulash she used to serve him sometimes, or the damn butterscotch pudding he'd scarf down in a matter of moments.

Eyeing the ingredients for the pudding, he settles on making something else instead. He's stuck to vegetables mostly, seeing as meat is usually a little hard to come by and expensive. And today is no different because the butcher had been out last time he'd checked and he hasn't tried buying any off of Marty yet. He gets out a tin of baked beans, a leek, an onion, some peas, a carrot and a parsnip – preparing for a quick shepherd's pie with the leftover mash and gravy he has from yesterday.

It's a little under salted at the end but he deems it good enough. *You can always add more salt later*, he thinks idly as the backdoor opens.

"Oh, that smells good." Ben hums, taking a seat.

"Don't sound so surprised, you'll kill my confidence, kid." He snorts and scoops out a healthy portion into a plate he'd set out for Ben.

"I know you ain't lacking in that, Buck, don't worry." Ben's tone is cheery and his eyes wide as he tracks the food like a man starved – *he can't possibly know what he'd just dropped on John. He can't know the sound of a gun going off in an empty forest, the way barbed wire digs into your palms, the scent of iron draining out of a body, the rot of men half-alive but persisting.*

He pauses, the pie dripping off the big spoon and onto his plate, a

lump in his throat and his palms sweating. He'd never – the men knew better than to call him *Buck*. He was never *Buck* to anyone. People took *Bucky* and ran with it. When they were referring to the both of them it was the *Buckies.* But he was never just *Buck,* it was never interchangeable no matter how much Gale liked to poke fun at him for the similarity.

"You got me confused with some other fella' there, kid. Name's *Bucky*." He puts the spoon away and tries to settle in for the meal even though he suddenly feels no hunger.

Ben eyes him and - and he can just *tell* the questions are coming, he can tell that the kid thinks this is a weird hill to die on. But it's – it doesn't *feel* right. At least not while his Buck's not with him. That isn't his name even if he had given it so freely – even if it wasn't his to give originally; belonging to someone from John's past, someone from *way back when*.

"Why's that off limits?" Ben chews on his vegetables thoughtfully, humming as he does so.

Ben's smarter than either Marty or Peg give him credit for. He's a spark, ready to set fire to anything that catches his interest, curiosity spreading rapidly. Bucky knows better, though, knows the glint in those brown eyes like they're Gale's own blue ones. Ben's an observer, a people-watcher just like Buck, and he's got a mind for strategy and numbers that rivals his, too. Ben just chooses not to make it as obvious, doesn't need to make it known and keeps it an ace up his sleeve instead.

"'S not me, is it? Another guy I know." He shrugs, shoveling some beans and potato crust into his mouth to give himself an excuse to stop talking.

"*Buck*, you say." The other looks thoughtful for a moment before continuing with his meal, suddenly unconcerned. "Must have been confusing since you practically got the same name and all."

He snorts lightly, knows that he's being let off light, that Ben could pursue the topic if he wanted to but was instead throwing John a bone. He appreciates it but it makes him fear what sort of face he'd made. It had to have been something frightful and desperate if it was enough to make the other give up.

Ben doesn't slip up after that. Not even as the weeks pass and summer turns into fall, he doesn't ever once call him *Buck* again.

He doesn't know whether to be grateful for his tact, or to resent him for fearing the name and John's own brittle state at the mere mention of it.

He looks at the calendar by accident. He's sorting through the magazines and the books Marley had left him yesterday when she'd come over to see the horse and sees the date on the newspaper – *October 7th*. He freezes with his hand pressed into the grayscale photo on the front page, not taking it in. October 7th means that today is October 8th, which means that it's – it's the day Bucky had woken up after a fantastic night out in London, an incredible fuck, and an unreasonable amount of optimism for his situation coursing through his veins. *The day Buck had gone down over Bremen*.

It's the anniversary of his entire world collapsing in on itself.

He feels it hit him in the knees. He stumbles back against the sink, his chest constricting. He doesn't – he doesn't think it was this bad in the Stalag. He remembers catching the date over the radio and looking to Gale who'd had a frown on his gaunt face that could have rivalled Harding's after a night out ending in them all three sheets to the wind.

He remembers gripping the other's shoulder and squeezing, remembers Gale briefly covering his hand with his own before they'd moved on. There were no words exchanged, there was no room for them.

The same had happened a few days later as well; when John had mentioned idly that he'd gone down on the tenth, not even two full days after Gale himself. He remembers huddling against Buck as the wind howled through the barracks, quietly saying *Brady and I went down last year today.* The other had shuffled a little in the small cot, fingers tracing over the scar under Bucky's eye. And Bucky had known what he was thinking then, the questions he wanted to ask. *What took you so long,* wasn't among them even if he'd never truly given an answer to it. Mostly, they would have consisted of *what happened in the in-between? Who roughed you up? Did you follow me to hell on an impulse?*

But Buck hadn't voiced any of them. Instead, he'd nodded with a sardonic smile and said: *they didn't even rotate the crews between the missions.* Bucky had been grateful for it then, what he'd seen and witnessed still too raw in his memory.

Now, however, he wishes he had talked to Buck about it. Wishes he

voiced his fears and how elated he was that they were both alive and together even if it was in the Stalag. Instead, he'd just shrugged and said *there's a lack of crews in the 100th these days, don't you know?* And then they'd both gone to sleep.

Maybe talking about it would have been better and maybe not. But he could see that it weighed on Gale regardless, that lack of knowledge. Because if Gale didn't know what happened, he couldn't help. And ashamed as he is to say it now, he hadn't wanted the help. He'd already felt like a burden, he hadn't wanted to add onto that under any circumstances. Instead, he'd kept it to himself, tucked it away and let Buck boss him around the prison camp while they made preparations for their possible escape.

Maybe if he'd talked about it, he wouldn't be feeling like this right now.

His lungs ache with the effort it's taking him to breathe steadily. His palms are sweaty and his mind is spinning in circles, replaying Red's words in his head – *he went down swinging. He went down swinging. He went down swinging.* Of course he had. Buck would never throw in the towel. He'd go out guns blazing but – but Gale's safe now (or so John assumes). He's safe and with his fiancé-possible-wife and maybe already with a baby on the way – it's been enough time, so who knows.

He picks up the bottle of whiskey he'd been planning on putting away and slides down onto the ground. Popping the bottle open, he thinks about how alcohol never really helped. How he'd drank to stop feeling nothing but it only ever perpetuated the numbness. He thinks that maybe, that's why he did it. Because if he drank himself stupid, he could blame the negligence and the apathy on the drink rather than his own faulty brain and everything that haunts him.

That's how Ben finds him later in the afternoon – drunk and teary-eyed, hugging his own knees and mumbling about anniversaries and German cities.

"Jesus Christ – *Bucky!*" Ben rushes to his side, prying the half-empty bottle out of his hands and setting it to the side.

He must truly look pathetic because Ben doesn't even try getting him to move. The other just sighs heavily, fills a glass with water and sits down next to him.

"You know…" The kid starts idly. "I always thought you were

handling the whole post-war thing well. Guess even you have your bad days."

He snorts because he can't help it. He's glad, in a way, that he at least *appears* put together even when he's feeling less than. He sniffles, sucking in a breath until he feels steady enough to speak.

"Don't know me for long enough to make that call."

Ben scoffs, bumping their shoulders together and then stays leaning against him like he knows that Bucky needs the anchor of physical touch to keep himself grounded.

"I've seen your smug smirk and scraggly mustache every day for the past month and a half. I'd say I know you pretty well by now, man."

"Hey," He grunts, fighting down a grin in order to appear offended. "No need to insult me when you've got the same shit going on." He lifts his head, biting back a groan as his vision swims.

Everything feels – *lighter* when he's drunk, like he could tilt sideways and fall through the ground, through the soil, and come out on top at the other side of the world. He presses his fingertips along the grooves between the tiles on the kitchen floor, swaying into Ben and then away from him almost involuntarily. His tongue feels dangerously loose, the urge to just start talking and never shut up almost impossible to contain. Buck was always the one who took care of John when he got maudlin while drinking. He always knew what to say, where to push and how to get him to stop talking or give up an impending fight. But there's no fights here and there's no Buck either.

Ben doesn't know any of these things, despite his words. Because Ben hasn't seen him at his worst, hasn't been around Bucky when he truly got into his own head.

"*Recognition of the self through the other*, or whatever the hell Sartre was talking about." The other hums and Bucky tilts back until he's baring his throat to the world, the curls on the crown of his head pressed to the cabinet. His hair's getting longer.

"You read, kid?" He's heard of Sartre, he thinks, back in one of the bars in England. Some of those boys were scholars before the draft; noses buried in books day and night forced to point up into the sky.

"Yeah, and I got a book for you. Don't know if it'll help or not but… You should try Camus' *Stranger*."

“I’ll keep it in mind,” He says even though he knows he’ll forget about it as soon as he gets a good night’s sleep. His gut churns – the consequences of drinking on an empty stomach catching up with him. He should get up and put some bread in his mouth, soak up the alcohol swirling inside of him, but while feeling lighter than a feather, he also feels inexplicably *heavy*.

“Do you… do you want ta’ maybe… tell me ‘bout it?” Ben goads, his grin sheepish but also genuine.

He’s a good kid, Bucky thinks, *deserves more than whatever this is.*

“Nineteen-forty-three,” He enunciates carefully as to not slur his words too much. “October eight.”

“Two years ago today,” Ben confirms, offering him the glass of water and he accepts it gladly.

“Two years ago today, my best friend Buck’s plane was shot down over Bremen.” He manages after draining the glass.

“Ah,” Ben stills against him, becoming a statue, unsure of how to proceed.

“October tenth, nineteen-forty-three, Münster.” He continues, trying hard not to just stop talking altogether. “We lose a few Forts to mechanical failure. We lose two to flak. Engine one down, cut the fuel, feather it. Clanton down. The flak stops, hundreds of fighter pilots enter the sky, more than on any mission so far.” He smacks his head back against the cabinet, making himself remember, forcing the information to the forefront.

“The entire low element gone in a matter of minutes,” He hisses, slapping his open palm against the ground. “Engine three gone, cutting the fuel, feathering. Rocket incoming, Hambone takes a heavy hit. Engine four struggling, one engine left and barely keeping pace, feathering. Salvo the fucking bombs and sound for bail-out.”

“You jumped?” Ben prompts when John takes too long to continue, mind stuck between then and now, hurtling through the air and being stuck to the tiles of his grandma’s kitchen floor.

“No other choice,” He shrugs. It was never an option, going down with his Fort, at least not until he knew for certain if Buck was alive or not.

“And your friend, he…” Ben trails off, leaving an empty space for John to fill.

He smirks, shaking his head. “Bastard was already in the POW camp when I got there. Was naggin’ on me for bein’ late.”

He feels Ben relax at his side, at ease now that he knows the story has a happy ending for both parties. John nudges the kid with his elbow, motioning to the bottle.

“Pour it out into the sink,” The instruction is barely more than a suggestion.

“Quittin’?” Ben gets up and John hears the sound of the liquid draining out of the bottle in a steady stream. Fuck, he has to piss.

“Shit never really helped anyway,” Shrugging, he tries to get up and Ben hurries to support him when he sways.

“Good on you,” Ben claps his back and steers him back into the hall and to the right where the arch leading into the living room is. “And thank you for telling me, Bucky. I know it can’t be easy, so it means a lot.”

“You’re too good to me, kid, I’ll get a big head.” He chuckles. “Owe you one for this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ben eases him down onto the scratchy, beige sofa gently. “Just doin’ my civic duty. You rest your weary head and I’ll be around later to check on you. Alright?”

“Mm,” He hums, closing his eyes when the floral print of the wallpaper starts spinning at a nauseating speed. He’s floating away, mind a mix of being in the Stalag, of Gale dragging him back to base after countless nights out. “Sure, Buck. Say hi to Marge for me.”

They don’t talk about it. When Ben comes by later and wakes Bucky up to drink water and have some bread and cheese, they don’t talk about it. Instead Ben stares at him across the table with something conflicted in his eyes, biting back whatever he wants to say as Bucky does his best not to throw up.

Such kind eyes, he thinks as he meets them. Not a trace of pity in them, just startling clarity like he’s seeing right through Bucky. He doesn’t deserve the other’s worry or care. Ben should be out there finding the love of his life and starting a family, not here with John and the sorry

excuse of a man he's become.

"Think I can stay for a few days?" Ben asks abruptly and Bucky blinks, clearing his throat before he speaks.

"Yeah, 'course." He sets the half-finished slice of bread down. "Everything alright?"

"Ma's caught a nasty cold so I don't wanna risk gettin' it from her."

It's a lie. It's an obvious lie because Ben hadn't brought anything other than his usual satchel with him. It's a lie because when he asked yesterday, Ben'd told him he had plans to go see a film with some of his friends in a day or so. Ben's asking to stay so that Bucky wouldn't be alone. He's asking to stay over for the tenth, too, just in case.

Heat rushes to John's cheeks as his throat constricts. *Fuck.*

"Yeah, kid, always." He smiles, grateful beyond words to finally have a friend in his corner again. To finally be able to kill the silence that's been so oppressive around him ever since his grandma died.

And when the tenth rolls around, John coughs up the cash and takes them both to see *Mildred Pierce* instead of holing himself up in the house and drinking himself stupid.

They get the truck working late October.

Ben had shown up that morning with a grin and a new set of rubber tubes. They were a replacement for the ones that were rotten and crumbling, ones that John had deemed were the cause of the truck's inactivity.

He's deep in next to the engine with Ben behind the wheel, trying to start the truck, when the barn door creaks open. It should be Marty with the grain for *Dice* so he doesn't pay it any mind, he keeps tightening the Jubilee Clip on the hose with a flathead.

He's ready to bring the hood down and declare the work done when a voice pierces through the air.

"Never thought I'd see you getting your hands dirty like this, John."

"Son of a bitch!" He slams the top of his head into the metal of the hood so hard that he sees *stars*. The noise reverberates through the barn as Ben jumps out of the car with a startled *Bucky!*

“John!” The sound of it is followed by two sets of footsteps rounding the truck to check on him as he braces himself against the metal frame.

“Fuck, *fuck!* Am I bleeding? Is this it?” He brings a hand up to his hairline and winces when he feels the blood smear across his forehead.

“Shit,” Buck – *Buck! It’s Buck!* – mutters something under his breath before leading him slowly away from the truck and onto a little stool they have sitting around in the space around them. Buck moves the tools from the stool and puts him there instead.

“Do you have a first aid kit lyin’ around?” Gale directs somewhere behind him and he realizes the other’s probably talking to Ben.

“Buck, you-” He doesn’t get further with his sentence because Buck’s tilting his head back and making everything spin momentarily. He thinks he hears Ben let out a quiet and confused *Buck?* before running for the shed outside. It’s where John had been leaving supplies like extra clothes and the first aid box in case he needed it since he’d been spending so much time in the barn already and injuries weren’t uncommon and-

He smacks the other’s hand away.

“Buck! What are you- ? You’re here!” He splutters, finally taking the time to look at the other properly. His vision swims before zeroing in on the other. His breath hitches as the blue of the other’s eyes comes into focus.

He’s real. Bucky thinks, fingers reaching out to touch before remembering himself and dropping back down. He’s real and he’s as beautiful as he was that day John said goodbye to him in Nebraska. Blonde hair a little longer around the ears, messy but clean, the scars on his cheeks fading, the bow of his lips as it tugs up into a smirk, the toothpick in his mouth – it’s all there. He’s beautiful and he’s *here.*

“Here,” Ben, barely out of breath and looking worried, hands the box over.

“Head back, let me see you.” Gale instructs and John obeys because he’ll always follow if Buck’s orderin’.

“What’s the damage, doc?” He hums, giddy as Buck’s fingers gently swipe his hair back to look at the cut. The other just frowns and hands

the box back to Ben.

“Get me the gauze and the iodine.”

Ben rummages through the kit and obeys just like Bucky did. It makes him grin stupidly, that Buck can instantly command a room no matter how long he’s been out of the commander role. There’s a way about him that makes people want to listen, want to be polite and useful in his presence. John’s fallen for it more times than he can count and Ben seems to be suffering under the same spell.

He hisses as the cut gets cleaned but the burn of it is soothed by how careful Buck’s being with him. He feels fragile and he sort-of likes it, likes the gentle way the other’s tilting his head to the side, likes how he can finally relax now that the other’s here.

“Gauze pad and adhesive.” Buck trades the gauze in his hand for the other one and John finds himself with a piece of white fabric pasted to his hairline, looking like a fool.

“Alcoholic wipes.” Gale doesn’t stop at dressing the wound. He takes the wipes and cleans where the blood had slid down the side of his face and the bridge of his nose, into his eyebrow and across his eye. He’s focused on the task and Bucky’s focused on staring at him – so focused, in fact, that when he meets Ben’s eyes over the other’s shoulder and sees *shock* in them, he almost jolts out of his seat.

“Out of a Fort but not out of danger, huh, John?” Buck drawls, leaning back and looking at his handiwork a Bucky blinks up at him balefully.

“Buck.” It seems that that’s the only thing he’s capable of saying. Instead of forming a coherent sentence, he surges up and hugs the other fiercely, uncaring of the audience. The other grips him in turn, hands patting the back of John’s jacket as John sways them left and right a little.

“Easy, John, you could have a concussion.” The other warns, slowly letting go and John wants to cling to him desperately, wants to clutch at him and never let go.

“You alright, Bucky?” Ben’s voice manages to pierce the fog surrounding John’s brain at the moment and he startles.

“Shit, yeah. Just caught me off guard.” He runs a hand through the hair at the back of his head. “Sorry. Buck, this is Ben. He’s been helping me out with *Dice*.” He points his thumb to the horse peering

over the gate of her pen, sniffling at them slightly.

“Gale Cleven,” Buck holds out his hand and Ben hurriedly puts the box down, wipes his hands on his overalls and takes the handshake.

“Really? I coulda’ sworn it was *Buck*.” Ben’s grin is easy and it seems to relax the other some.

Buck shakes his head, glancing briefly at John. “That’s what Bucky would like you to think.”

“Buck and Bucky,” Ben whistles as if he’s surprised, as if John hadn’t already made a point in differentiating between the two over the past three months or so.

“Sorry to drop in on you like this,” Gale winces as he fixes the adhesive taped to John’s sweaty forehead. “I tried the house first but nobody was answerin’.”

“Yeah, we’ve – we’ve been out here the entire day trying to get this piece of shit to work.” He motions to the truck and then tugs on the other’s jacket. “Come here, come on.”

He’s excited, he realizes. He’s excited and elated to have Buck next to him again. It feels like he’s flying again, like he’s got Gale’s voice in his ear telling him about the clear skies and urging the Forts into a tighter formation. The sense of safety the other brings with him is unmistakable now what John has it back.

“This is *Eurydice,* or *Dice* for short.” He runs a hand up the side of her neck until he’s ruffling the tufts of hair between her ears.

Buck lets out a soft coo and offers her his hand to sniff at, to get familiar with. “She’s a beauty.”

“That she is,” He puffs his chest out, proud like he had any say in what she looks like. “Smart, too. Keeps chasing the birds away from the grain sacks.”

“*Dice,* huh?” Gale seems entirely absorbed with dragging his fingers down the bridge of her nose and her strong neck. He traces the smattering of spots on the white coat there before tracing the mountain range of dark fur on her flank. The last of the tension leaves him as *Dice* nudges her head against his and John watches it drain out of him. Buck cradles her against his cheek and, abruptly, John feels like he’s intruding on something.

“Been taking care of John here, have you?” The other’s speaking to the horse in a low voice that rumbles more than Bucky remembers it. It’s lower, rougher, and it surges into his core like hot oil melting him from the inside.

Dice neighs lightly as if she’s responding to the inquiry and John can just stand there, a speechless onlooker stunned stupid by the touching exchange.

“Good,” Gale hums, “Good girl. You and I are gonna get along swell.”

He clears his throat and shoves his hands into his pockets. “We should get you back to the house and get you settled. You tired?”

Gale nods, “Not necessarily but I could put my feet up.”

“Come on then,” He leads the way, passing Ben’s *knowing* stare on his way out.

“Shouldn’t you finish with the truck first?” Buck questions and John stops in his tracks.

The other’s arrival had thrown him off course so completely that he’d forgotten why he was out here in the first place. The tubes and the truck, he winces and motions for Ben to get back behind the wheel.

“Might as well,” He finally drops the hood down *carefully* and sends a prayer up into the heavens.

And it seems as if whoever’s listening is truly on his side today because the moment Ben turns the key, the truck rumbles to life. He claps his hands together, grin matching Ben’s as he cheers from inside the cabin. The truck groans and protests as it shakes approximately ten years of inactivity and weather damage off. The tires still need changing and the paint’s chipping at the edges but it’s running and that’s all that matters.

“Got it in one,” Gale hums and Bucky wheezes a little at that, kicking at the nearest part of the truck affectionately.

“We’ve been at this for a month,” He hisses, “No more bus fares and bike rides.”

“That mean you can drop me off at Marty’s later?”

“Cool it, kid, we’re not home free yet.” He motions to the tires and

Ben pouts at him, turning the truck off. “Catch a ride with him when he comes by with the grain.”

“But my workday’s not over,” The other raises an eyebrow and he fights down a blush at what almost escapes his mouth. *I’ve got Buck now, you can go home* – as if Buck’s here to stay, as if now that he’s here, all of John’s problems are gone. No, no. Far from it. Buck being here just makes John even more confused.

“Don’t worry about it.” He pats the kid’s shoulder when he exits the truck. “Looks like it’s gonna rain anyway, hardly riding weather.”

Ben sighs and nods, tugging at his suspenders a little. “Suppose you’re right. Well, I’ll see ya later then. Bucky, Buck.” The other gives the both of them a salute and looks entirely too amused while doing it.

“Nice kid,” Buck comments as they leave the barn, heading towards the house under the cover of the darkening sky.

He nods, glancing at the barn and seeing Ben herding the cat in ahead of the downpour that’s surely to break through the clouds any moment now. “Yeah, he’s been a real life-saver.”

He opens the door for the other and Buck knocks his boots against the stoop, getting rid of excess dust, before stepping foot into the mint green of the kitchen. John watches him take it all in and winces as the other grins.

“This is… *cute.*”

“This is an old lady’s dream kitchen.” He snorts, knocking his knuckles against the white, wooden paneling that goes halfway up the wall. “Ignore the matching cabinets and stove.”

“It’s very *green.”* Gale drops his duffle onto the ground and takes off his jacket, draping it over the back of a chair nearby like he’s already familiar with the place.

“It’s all wallpaper,” He sighs, plucking the other’s bag from the tiled floor. He ushers Buck out the kitchen and into the narrow hallway.

“Oh, this is…” Gale keeps *grinning* and John can’t even fault the guy the amusement because seeing Gale smile like this is worth the witty remarks.

“*It’s all wallpaper.”* He repeats, stressing as the brown paneling and

cream-beige stripes of the hallway assault them. “I’ll give you a tour since we’re already moving.”

“I’m honored,” The other teases and Bucky can only pout at him in return.

“Bathroom’s across the kitchen, this to the right is the living room.” He waves a hand through the archway and Gale peers inside, observing that this room has unfortunate floral wallpapers that clash with the old rug under the coffee table horribly.

“Cozy,” Gale nods as if in approval and Bucky rolls his eyes.

“This, I think, used to be a storage room of some sort but, I’d call it a home office right now.” He motions to the typewriter sitting on an old roll-top desk. There’s a large, ornate bookcase on the left wall and a floral high-backed armchair in the corner next to it. The room’s smaller than he’d consciously realized.

“Hey, no wallpaper!” Gale points out while perusing the book selection briefly before giving up on the count of there being entirely too many.

“Up the stairs, Major.” He pats Buck on the back and the other chuckles.

They emerge into another hallway which is heavily paneled but this time in a combination of dark browns and light browns instead of the lighter colors. He winces as Gale, once again, chuckles at the design choices of the people who owned the house before.

“You say your grandparents built this place?” Buck intones as if they’re picking up on an old conversation thread as he zeroes in on the piano at the end of the hall.

“Jesus, no. They bought this place just after the first war, when grandpa returned home. Wanted to get out of the city and away from all the noise.” He taps a finger to one of the picture frames on the wall. It’s a hand-drawn portrait done in pencil depicting his grandpa and grandma when they were a bit younger.

“This thing work?” Buck draws his hand against the lid of the piano and he shrugs.

“Haven’t tried it out, might be out of tune.”

“We’ll see,” Gale looks determined and it strikes Bucky that he didn’t know the other even played piano. He knew about the guitar but it seems like – well. He wouldn’t call himself a bad friend but it seems like there’s still things about the other he’s yet to discover.

“This is my room,” He nods to the door on the left side from where they’re standing. “The upstairs bathroom’s back there, also on the left and you. Uh. You can settle in this one.” He pushes open the door across from his before hurrying over to crack open the windows. The room used to be Beth’s and he’d gotten most of her stuff out of it in that first week but it’s been a while since he’s aired it out. He puts the other’s bag onto the bed and turns to observe him looking around the room.

“It’s very blue.” Gale notes the walls, the carpet on the floor and the metal frame of the bed.

“There’s another room but Ben’s claimed that one.”

Buck nods, moving around the room and poking at the chest of drawers, looking at himself in the mirror briefly before observing the landscape painting on the wall – the one his ma' made and gifted her parents when they moved in.

“Sarah E.” Buck reads the signature with ease even though it’s nothing more than a scribble.

“Sarah Egan,” He confirms.

“Had real talent.” The other smiles at him gently and he nods, wishing that a couple of paintings and sketches weren’t all that he has left of her.

“I’ll get you fresh sheets if you want to-” He waves a hand to the bed, feeling suddenly like he’s out of his depth.

This is all too casual.

After two and a half months of radio silence, Buck appears as if out of thin air, grinning like nothing’s out of the ordinary and following John around his house while he gives him a tour. *Something is incredibly wrong,* Bucky realizes. Something’s wrong and Buck won’t talk about it. There is a problem here somewhere that John can’t unearth by himself and Buck seems to be doing his best at pretending that there’s nothing out of the ordinary happening. Like he hadn’t disappeared out of John’s life just like that, like he hadn’t ignored the two ill-advised

letters John had sent. Like he hadn't shown up here without as much as a word of warning.

"Bucky?" Gale approaches him, concern clear on his face and John – John *can't.*

He smiles but it's strained, he knows. "I'll go get you the linens."

He leaves the other to get settled and makes across the hallway into his own room. The room is big, it used to house a single before his grandma had made the preparations and brought in a brand new queen that was just on the side of too soft. Across the bed is an old wardrobe and opposite to the door is a vanity that belonged to whoever owned the house before. He catches his own expression in the mirror and winces at the frown furrowing his brow. He forces his face to relax as he fetches the clean linens, trying desperately to ignore every negative thought bubbling to surface now that the shock of Buck's sudden appearance has worn off.

Why? Is the most prominent thing on his mind. Followed quickly by: *why now?*

It's been months of nothing and now he's just here and John's forced to choose between being elated that he is, and being angry at Gale for everything that's happened – or hasn't happened. He's taking too long to locate the sheets when he hears the first notes of a piano filling the air. He pauses, puzzled before remembering the comments the other made earlier. He swallows heavily and goes to lean against the doorway, allowing himself to observe as Gale's fingers dance across the ivory keys. They're nimble, running scales, testing the tones. Buck frowns when he strikes a bad key and John knows he's making a mental note to try and fix it all on his own even though Bucky has no tools for him to do so.

Grandma once told him about how difficult it was to tune a piano, how experts would need to be called. He doesn't really know if it's true or if Beth just told him that in order to stop him from banging at the keys like a savage.

"It's a spinet." Buck pauses his playing. "Smallest kind, limited space and all."

"What's the verdict?"

The other turns to look at him, a smile parting his lips. "She needs some work but nothing that can't be fixed."

The feeling that they're speaking in code strikes him then. Buck appears to be talking in a language all of his own, a tongue that John's not privy to. And he is so *tired* of rifling through the dictionary word by word, tired of comparing what he knows to that which is foreign to him.

"What are you doing here, Buck?" He asks, resigned.

Smile slipping off his face, the other grimaces. "Seeing if the piano needs tuning."

"Gale," It's so rare that he uses the other's given name. It only comes up when things are grave or if he's trying to make a point. And right now, in the silent hallway where they stand at an impasse, things certainly seem *grave.*

Buck's shoulders heave as he turns on the bench, straddling it as he peers up at John. "Do you want me to leave?"

"That's not at all what I'm saying." He rolls his eyes, can't help but feel irritated at the deflection. They're not young men anymore – the state of them, rather than their years – and he's tired of beating around the damned bush. There was a time where he might have laughed it off, been glad for the other's presence; but he has spent too many tense weeks and then months feeling his own brittle composure crumble at the other's absence to play it off as *nothing* now.

"Then, can I ask you for a favor, John?" The blue of his eyes draws Bucky in as it always has, alluring like an enchanted pool waiting for an unsuspecting victim to fall in. He can't say no and no amount of self-respect could make him do so. *Pathetic.*

"Sure, Buck."

"I – a couple of days. I need a couple of days and then I'll tell you." The other's throat bobs around a swallow and John's eyes track the motion. "I promise."

He runs a hand over his face, dutifully avoiding the bandage over the still-smarting cut, frustrated but still so willing to just give in to the other's whims. *Pathetic.*

"Yeah, alright." Mouth tight, he nods and hands off the linens. "I'll make food."

He leaves the other to sort the bedroom out himself, feeling the

stifling tension between them like a physical weight on his skin. It was never – it hasn't been that bad since the Stalag. Since Buck had found him alone outside, staring at the guard towers and reciting baseball games to himself; contemplating his imminent demise and the futile way of their existence. Buck had pleaded with him then – another favor: stay alive (the *for me* implied). *And he had*. He had continued forward then as he moves forward now, too. The tension had dissipated over time, with the news of D-Day approaching and the Allies on enemy soil.

But there are no troops marching onto John's property to give them something else to focus on, no boats making land at his front gate; ready to storm into the house and save lives, no fighter jets buzzing towers ready to free them.

It's only John and Gale and the things left unsaid which will have to wait *a couple of days.*

Chapter End Notes

I hate hate hate the way americans are portrayed as never taking their shoes off inside their houses in media bc I never know if its true or not so just ignore that shit if I mention it in the fic (I'm heavily European)
Stay tuned for chap two and lemme know what you think about my silly little OCs in the comments xoxo
If you wanna find me, im @marionettefthjm on twt and tumblr!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Hey, Hi!!! It took me too long to finish this but here we are! Sorry for the wait, i kept adding to the fic and before you know it, boom. 40k.
> There's smut at the end as promised but the journey there is more important i think.
> As per usual, im just making shit up this has nothing to do with the real people or events.
> I'll edit it in the upcoming days so don't mind the mistakes and have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The late lunch had been tense. They ate the pasta dish John had whipped up in morbid silence, eyes on their plates, still shoveling food into their mouths like it was their last meal. They cleaned up in silence as well; John washing and Buck drying the plates and the cutlery. After, they'd retreated to the living room and Bucky had turned on the radio to follow the baseball game being played in the city while Buck had settled down with a book he'd picked out from the study.

It had been – oddly domestic. It was tense but also like they'd been doing this since the very beginning. The silence prevailed and for once, John wasn't going to give in first. He's not going to give the other an easy way out of the awkward atmosphere between them.

And when the game had ended, Bucky had gotten up with a mumbled *goodnight,* leaving Gale in the din of the living room.

He spent most of the night staring at the ceiling instead, thinking of possible reasons for Gale's being here. He'd run through his options and it's sad that not one of them were *Buck's here because he missed me.* It's sad that it crosses his mind only once before being disregarded. There were other ways to catch up, there were *easier* ways to stay in contact. Gale was here with a mission, John's just not sure of what it is yet.

The new day begins with John having gotten only three hours of sleep, disoriented and stumped stupid to find Buck in his kitchen frying eggs and sausages while toasting bread in the oven. He has to

rub at his eyes to make sure he's seeing right and when his vision focuses, he loses his breath. He might be angry and cross with the other, but that doesn't mean Gale's any less stunning of a sight. He's dressed down to a white, short-sleeved shirt and denims, bare feet on the cool tiles. He swallows heavily and walks further inside, making a point of yawning loudly and announcing himself.

"Mornin', Buck."

Buck turns to grin at him over his shoulder and John feels like he could *cry*. The sun's hitting him at just the right angle to make his eyes appear crystalline, his hair is a messy nest of spun gold atop his head, the taper of his waist inviting where his shirt's tucked in and John – he turns around and walks out of the kitchen.

"John?" Buck's voice follows him as he stomps down the hallway. He heads for the mailbox to give himself room to breathe because – because seeing Gale in his kitchen, making breakfast and lookin' like a mirage, it's everything John's never dared to dream of. He sucks in deep breaths as he picks up the mail and shuffles through it – a pamphlet, an invitation to some event in town, a letter from his sister. It's gotten cold outside recently and he's definitely feeling the chill this morning – shirtless as he is – but the bracing air is good, a shock to the system. It settles him in the present, making him forget about the haze that was threatening to settle over him in that kitchen.

"Bucky?" Gale's followed him to the door and He's looking at him with a confused frown, eyebrows downturned and worried, arms crossed over his chest to protect himself from the cold.

"Sorry, remembered it was urgent." He shows Buck the letter from Marley, forcing a smile.

"Anything to be worried about?"

"Just Marlene." He nudges the other back inside, feeling a little more settled now that he's shivering slightly.

"Your sister." The question is clear in the other's tone but John doesn't feel like elaborating. He doesn't want to get into it and any topic he cracks open now will just end up with him asking Gale things he's not supposed to – *for a couple more days at least*.

"Made yourself at home, I see." The kitchen smells like toasted bread and eggs and the grease is going to make him sick but he can't resist it.

“Hope you don’t mind.” Buck shrugs and takes a seat opposite to him at the small kitchen table. Their knees bump together, and somehow, this doesn’t seem like an accident. It stirs something in him, the fact that Buck is trying to bridge the gap between them even without talking.

“A meal I didn’t have to cook? Nah, I’d never mind that.”

He checks the clock above the door and notes that it’s earlier than he’s gotten up in the last several weeks. He’d finally gotten rid of waking with the sun but seeing as he’s barely slept, it makes sense that his body was treating last night more like an extended nap. He needs a cigarette. There is a shelf on the wall opposite to the cabinets and the stove that holds several decorative cookie jars, a mortar and pestle, an old copper teapot and a clay pot that’s painted with flowers.

He’s barely done with the food before he’s reaching his hand into the biggest cookie jar and pulling out a pack of *Luckys* from within the dusty container. He takes them outside, onto the back porch where he sits down onto the swing.

The first inhale is always the best. No matter how much time’s passed between now and the last time he’s had one, the first hit of nicotine is always a relief. He lets his head drop back and closes his eyes, chest expanding around an inhale.

Buck takes a while to follow him out. He had probably stayed in and cleaned up after them both. John feels a twinge of regret for leaving him on his own but he’s also feeling a lot of other things that he’s not sure how to deal with so he lets the regret join the club. Buck’s fetched a blanket from the living room and managed to purloin one of Bucky’s thicker flannels from the hallway coatrack. The other drapes the blanket over his bare shoulders and sits down next to him, bringing both feet up and curling in on himself. John sways them lightly, back and forth like the rocking of a boat.

Looking back at it, this silence between them isn’t entirely new. It had developed in the camp. It had developed when there was no energy to be wasted on useless chatter, when John had nothing to say to anyone, when he had been persuaded to stop talking about an escape and instead stopped talking altogether. And – they’d never needed words *before.*

There were gestures, body language, little nudges and looks that had always clued either John or Gale in on what the other was thinking.

They worked together seamlessly without needing to say anything. But John had *enjoyed* talking to Buck. He thrived on gathering up all of Buck's attention and keeping it to himself. Countless hours spent yapping just for yapping's sake, just to have Gale looking at him all attentive like. Nights out spent making a fool out of himself just to see Gale smile, to see him roll his eyes fondly and proudly proclaim that *John's not much of a singer but he's as good on the dance floor as he is in a plane.*

They'd never needed words but Bucky's never *lacked* them.

"Do you miss flying?" He breaks first because he always does.

"Like you wouldn't believe." Buck huffs, cheek propped up on his knee and watching the sun rise higher in the sky. Another moment of the damned silence before Buck breaches it.

"I miss the before." The other turns to look at him but John refuses to meet his eye. "Flying before the war. Flight school, running drills and formations. Fighter jets. Ain't nothin' else like it."

He remembers Gale from *before*. The fire he'd seen in him immediately, the one he'd later watched spread into a roaring inferno coming alight with the freedom a plane in his hands provided. Remembers Gale, wind-swept with rosy cheeks, rushing into Bucky's arms after he'd buzzed that tower with feathered engines when he wasn't supposed to. He remembers laughing about being on cleaning duty as punishment well into the night laid out on the tarmac after curfew, shoulders pressed too close together and voices hushed.

That was one of the few pivotal instances of realization in his life for many reasons. But mostly because, in that moment, it had become obvious to him that this *thing* he had for Buck wasn't temporary. That he didn't *want* it to be temporary. That he wanted to know Gale inside-out, wanted to know him as more than the version of him that existed in John's mind.

"I don't know if I could get back behind the yoke." He admits, putting his cigarette out on the armrest of the swing and flicking the butt into the empty flower pot next to it.

He knows Buck had gone back to flying easily, *eagerly*. Had been there when Gale and Rosie had gotten back from the Netherlands. Buck had barely been on English soil for more than a week before he was flying again. John misses flying, sure, but not like Buck. And he knows that – that flying was never for him what it was for Gale. Because Gale

valued freedom more than any man he'd ever met, and there never was a moment more freeing than soaring the skies unrestrained and uncontested.

"Not to that capacity," The other nods. "Not like that ever again."

"Think I've had enough of B-17s to last me a lifetime." He stretches his legs out and cracks his neck. The sun's reached just above the tallest grass on the horizon which means Ben should be here any minute now. He swathes himself in the blanket to keep the warmth in and points to the right.

"Watch."

The other follows with his gaze and sure enough, there's a cheerful whistle that always precedes Ben's arrival, before the rest of him rounds the house as well.

"Without a fail, every day for the last two and a half months." He grins as Buck chuckles next to him.

Ben pauses, wide-eyed as he stares at them grinning at him in turn.

"Morning, Sirs?" The other questions lightly and John shakes his head.

"Well-rested?" He calls and Ben nods, relaxing now that he knows he's not being ambushed.

"Getting off early helped." Walking over to them, he leans against the porch railing, observing them right back. "Isn't it a little cold for skivvies?"

"It's good for the system." He pouts, refusing to admit that he's freezing at this point.

"There's eggs and sausages inside if you're hungry." Buck nods his head back to the house and Ben's eyes light up at the mention of a meal.

"Don't mind if I do."

"The kid can put away food like you wouldn't believe." John snorts once the door's slammed closed behind Ben's quickly-retreating form.

"How old is he? He hardly looks like a kid."

"Astute as ever, Buck." Rolling his eyes, he gets up, fastening the

blanket like a cape around. “Twenty but age don't amount to experience.”

Gale smacks him on the shoulder, “As long as he doesn’t mind.”

“Oh, he minds, but that’s never stopped me from calling people things before.” He grins, arm still tingling from the brief contact.

“Don’t I know it.”

They follow the other inside but Buck doesn’t stop so John takes the opportunity to sit with Ben for a moment. He must make some sort of noise because Ben stops chewing to look at him imploringly.

“So.”

“So?” He crosses his arms over his chest and fights a smirk when the other tracks the motion with his eyes.

“That’s Buck, huh?” Ben takes a loud sip of his coffee and continues staring at him.

“That’s him alright.” He leans forward, accepting the challenge of maintaining eye contact.

“That the guy you’ve been torn up about since coming here?” The other speaks with a grin but the words strike deep fucking *fear* into John’s bones.

“*Benjamin*.” He hisses, grabbing the cup out of the other’s hand and puts it to the side rather forcefully.

“What?” The other rolls his eyes, palms flat against the table now. “Ya ain’t very subtle, Bucky. And I ain’t *stupid*.”

“Keep your damn voice down.” He looks to the door as if Buck’s going to appear out of thin air. He won’t, John can hear him puttering about upstairs, footsteps heavy. “Jesus, kid. I don’t need you implying anythin’”.

“I’m just sayin’.” Ben doesn’t look the least bit concerned or *disgusted* by whatever the hell John’s got going on. Instead, he just seems exasperated at John’s upset.

“Well, stop.” He grunts, finally looking away, unable to face the openness of the other’s gaze, how *accepting* it is. There’s no malice in those brown eyes, there’s nothing judgmental in them, just a gentle

curiosity that's rending him in twain ever so slowly.

"Ya talk to him about it?"

"Ben, drop it." He pushes away from the table and folds the blanket while he's standing. "I don't know why he's here or how long he's staying, and I'd like to make this as peaceful as possible for everyone involved. Got that?" He points to the kid and Ben lifts his hands up in surrender.

"Aye, Major. Understood."

The sense of unease follows him up the stairs and into his room where he finally manages to shrug on some proper clothing. He stares at himself in the vanity mirror again and frowns at the gauze on his forehead. He tugs it off, wincing as the adhesive pulls at his skin. Scraping his hand against the stubble growing in, he wonders if he should just let it grow out. He looks tired, he looks *different.*

There are more lines on his face, there's a crook down the bridge of his nose from where it had been broken a few too many times, the scar under his eye and in his eyebrow, the dark circles. He looks as shitty as he feels. And the sad thing is, that this is just him now, this is *the version of him worth knowing.* He's never bought it, and doesn't still. But he can't go back to the way things were, he doesn't know how to.

A knock on the doorframe draws his attention away from the mirror. He turns to see Gale there with a medium-sized cardboard box in his hands.

"What've you got there, Buck?" He tilts his head, noting the way the other shuffles into the room a little nervously.

"Thought you might want this back." Buck holds the object out and waits for John to accept it, patient even as Bucky hesitated.

He doesn't say *everything I've wanted back I have with me now.* It's a near thing but he doesn't say it. Mostly because it's partially untrue. Sure Buck's here, but John doesn't really have him. Never will, either.

He puts the box onto the bed and lifts the lid. He sucks in a sharp breath as he sees the first object. It's his flask. The silver with the fancy decal worn and graying but achingly familiar. He takes it out to feel the comforting weight of it in his hands. The next is his wristwatch, the one he thought he lost on a night out – right before that eight of October. He buckles it around his wrist and thumbs at

the soft leather of the strap. The security of having it with him again is more overwhelming than he thought it'd be.

The last thing is the *Guys and Dolls* book he'd given to Kidd before leaving for London. He opens it to the familiar inscription on the front. *To Bucky, from Buck: don't have too much fun without me. Stay safe.* A piece of paper tumbles out from between the pages and he has to blink to make sure he's seeing his lucky deuce with the two corners bit off on the sheets of his bed.

There's a lump in his throat that he has to swallow around. He'd tucked that in with Gale's things when he'd come back from leave. Left it behind because he knew he didn't want to have a safe flight, not with Gale gone. It was stupid and naïve, but he'd hardly been thinking right at the moment.

"And, this didn't fit in the box so…"

He swivels around to see Gale holding out a distressingly familiar piece of beige clothing.

"Buck," He fights down the tears. "Buck, you hate that jacket."

The other shrugs, blue eyes downturned and his hands clutching at the sheepskin. "Yeah, but you didn't ever look right without it."

"How did you-" He has to stop talking, has to instead just reach out and put the thing on. It fits almost like a glove, just a little loose around his middle where he's yet to put on proper weight, where he never may, and a little tighter around his arms where he'd gained muscles working around the property.

"Kidd shipped it to me. He didn't know your address so I was next of kin, I guess."

"Well, I hope he doesn't want his own back, 'cause that thing's somewhere at the bottom of the ocean by now." He winces, feeling like an idiot for ditching that thing first chance he got. Jack had saved his jacket for him, had thought to send it to Gale – assuming that the other would be in contact with John already. *Oh, fuck.* What if that's why Gale's here? What if he came by to drop the jacket off and then he'll be gone again? *No, shit. That's not it. Buck wouldn't put off talking because of that. Get it together, John!*

"It's still as obnoxious as ever," Buck's smiling as he says it, though, like he doesn't hate it at all.

“You know,” He runs a hand down the collar, noting that it’s been washed somewhat recently. “I’m glad I traded it in. Though it would’ve been a hell of a lot warmer in it, it doesn’t – it’s not tainted. *Jesus*.” He doesn’t know how to explain it – or rather, he does. But he doesn’t want to because he’s going to be risking sounding like a child clutching at his mom’s skirt.

“A staple of the before, huh?” Buck reaches out and fixes the lapel before zipping it closed for him, patting his chest. “I hated it because it was too obvious, you know. A beige jacket in the middle of all that dirt and greenery, too easy to spot.”

He sucks in a breath – mostly at the other’s proximity but also at the explanation. And realistically, John knew that the B-3 jacket was a relic even during their time flying, but it had been uniquely his. It never failed to get a rise out of Buck, never failed to draw eyes. He’d never thought that there was a real reason past the shallow one of it being *old* and kind-of *dirty*.

“I guess it doesn’t look half bad now,” Buck *winks* at him and, with a light shove, turns for the door. “Come on, I want to go see that horse of yours again.”

He swallows back every single word that wants to leave his mouth and follows after the other dutifully, hands tucked into the pockets of his new-old jacket.

John had always thought that he was prepared for many things in this life. He was prepared to die for his country, for example. He was prepared to forever hold his peace while Buck got married to the girl of his dreams. He was prepared to follow Gale into hell and back when he got on that B-17 on that fateful October morning.

He was not, however, prepared for the sight of Buck on a horse looking like he belonged in a film. Like he’s escaped a scene from *Stagecoach* or *Dodge City* and appeared in front of John’s very eyes, bringing the western with him.

He’s afraid that he might be drooling. He knows his mouth is a little bit open as he takes in the striking scene in front of him.

Gale’s in the saddle, looking down at Ben and talking to him about something. It seems important, whatever it is, but the words aren’t reaching Bucky. His thighs are strong as they keep him steady and his posture seems so natural that John can’t believe he’s ever seen Buck as

anything other than a cowboy. The sun's always loved Buck. It's always made his skin golden, made him glow where it just reddened the tops of John's shoulders and the bridge of his nose.

All he's missing is the hat and Ann Sheridan or Claire Trevor by his side, batting their eyelashes up at him in dreamy admiration.

Well, he's no Ann or Claire, but he's certainly doing his fair bit of dreamily admiring Gale as he takes the reins and sets off at a swift gallop down the property line.

"He's a natural," Ben grins at him, leaning his elbows back against the fence.

"Grew up 'round horses, that one." He clears his throat, finally able to breathe now that Buck's out of his immediate view. "Wyoming."

Ben whistles lowly, impressed. "Born on a horse, then."

They watch in silence as the other makes the lap around the fenced off area. Buck drives the horse faster and harder, grin on his face a mile wide and he looks – he looks *free.* He looks like the first time they'd flown together, the first time he looked at the expanse of the blue around them and realized this is what they'd been training for. His heart thuds in his chest sluggishly, beating an unsteady beat beneath his ribs.

Every moment Buck spends here, the less Bucky wants to let him go. And he knows, that at the end of the other's stay, he'll have to go through another gut-wrenching *goodbye*, but he just doesn't know how he'll handle it the second time around. This is bad for his health.

Buck's breathing heavily when he draws the horse to a halt in front of them, a light shine on his forehead from the exertion, hair a wind-swept mess.

"She's fast and agile, good breed." The other declares and Ben preens like he's the one being praised.

"Yessir, we do barrel racin' every few days. Keeps her entertained." The shorter smiles, running a hand along the side of *Dice's* head as the horse twitches into his palm.

"I'd like to see that when you're up for it." Gale turns the horse in a tight circle, his entire body engaged in the motion, concentration clear on his face. He's testing her, John realizes, trying to gauge how well

she'll follow. "How 'bout you, Bucky? You try your hand at horse ridin' yet?"

He snorts, shaking his head. "No, thanks!"

"I've been trying to get him to do it since I moved the horse here but he's stubborn." Ben shakes his head mournfully, shooting John a little glare.

"Don't worry, I'll get him in the saddle eventually." Buck's smile turns into a smirk and with the corner of his eye he sees Ben become a little starry-eyed.

"You gonna take care of her today? Leaving Ben jobless, I see." He crosses his arms over the fence and Buck huffs, rolling his eyes.

"Wouldn't dream of it," The other dismounts with startling ease and hands the reins off to Ben. "Though, if you do need help, I'll be around."

"Hope you'll be of more help than Bucky." Ben smacks him on the shoulder and John bristles in mock offence.

"Hey, now! What's this, gangin' up on me? In my own house?" He clutches at his chest and Ben shoves at him lightly. He doesn't move an inch and Ben seems to take this as a challenge. It's no use, Bucky's got height and mass on him so he lets the other try and tip him over half-heartedly without budging an inch.

"Tired yet?"

"Fuck off," Ben huffs and gives up, hopping onto *Dice,* followed by Buck's laughter.

"You're on your own for lunch today, we're going into town." He nudges Gale back towards the house. "Or we can pick you up something from a diner?"

"Nah, I'll manage. Thank you!" Ben waves them away, taking *Dice* for another run.

"We goin' to town?" Buck asks as they approach the house, huddling into his own leather jacket as a strong gust of wind sweeps over them.

"I need to run a couple of errands. Hope you don't mind tagging along." He hadn't planned on going today. As a matter of fact, he'd

been meaning to postpone going to the city until the end of the week. But he doesn't know what to do with Buck in his house. He doesn't think he can trust himself not to start *talking about it.* So he bumps the trip to today instead, hoping that being in Manitowoc will distract him enough from all the things his subconscious mind is cooking up.

"Lookin' forward to it, actually." The other bumps their shoulders together and John sways into him, lingering more than necessary as they enter the house.

They walk the fifteen minutes to the bus stop mostly in silence. Buck looks around, peers into the few abandoned property yards they come across, pauses to pet the stray cat that comes out to meet John every time he's walking by. He seems to be absorbing the surroundings, enjoying the nature that's grown yellowed with autumn.

The bus ride takes another half an hour. The bus is loud and clunky, filled only halfway. It's late enough in the morning that they'd avoided the rush of shipyard workers that usually crowds the bus. It would have been a strategic decision were it not for the fact that it was just John changing his plans last minute. Nevertheless, they sit pressed together at the shoulders and enjoy the bumpy ride into town.

The first stop is the mechanic where Buck takes an interest in a '42 *Lincoln Continental* being fixed up while John orders the tires with the help of the man who'd told him he'd be better off scrapping the truck.

"You got it working?" The man, *Fred* as the patch on the man's shirt informs him, sounds surprised and John tries not to be too smug about it.

"Sure did. All she needed was some lovin' and a new set of – uh, a lot of things. But she's running." He counts the cash out and hands it over.

"A model *A* like that, I'm not sure what I can do about the tires. Ford's these days look a lot different." Fred pockets the money regardless, nodding. "But, since you went through the effort of fixin' her up all on you own; I'll do my best."

"'S all I ask, man. Thank you." He pats the guy's shoulder and turns to find Buck's being – well, he's being chatted up by the owner of the *Continental*. She's leaning against the car, her fur shawl drawn over her shoulders just low enough to expose her cleavage and she's looking up at Gale with a coy smile. Her intent is unmistakable, really, and John feels himself churn at the sight with irrational jealousy.

“Who’s your friend, Buck?” He throws a hand over the other’s shoulders and it abruptly brings him back to England and the many pubs where he’d done the same countless times – both drunk and sober. He has to blink away the memory, the automatic way he tilts into Gale as if the room around them is too crowded to stay apart.

“John,” Gale drawls, nodding to the girl. “This is Evelyn, she was just tellin’ me about her car.”

He hums, inclining his head to the *Lincoln*. “Miss, mighty fine vehicle you have there.”

She waves a hand at the car as if she’s presenting it, a grin on her brightly-painted lips. “Hm? This ol’ thing?”

“Hardly old *or* little,” He smirks, laying the charm on thick. “Mighty impressive for you to be drivin’ it all on your own, too.”

She rolls her eyes in a cheeky motion, tapping her nails against the sleek, black paint. “Oh? Think I can’t handle it, do you?”

“Hey, now. I meant no disrespect.” He chuckles and Gale elbows him in the gut, making him wheeze out a laugh. “Only that I envy both your skill and bravery. Me an’ my buddy here just take the bus.”

She titters at that, a wind-chime laugh leaving her mouth. “I see. Then, if you *meant no disrespect*, I could offer you gentlemen a ride around town.”

And he’s about to accept for the hell of it; he’s about to say *I’d never pass up on the opportunity* when Gale interjects, tone firm but gentle.

“As much as we’d enjoy that, we’re on a tight schedule.” The other nods at her again, extracting himself from Bucky’s hold. “Maybe another time, Miss.”

He’s momentarily stunned by the other’s abrupt exit before he gets on with the program. He smiles at Evelyn sheepishly and starts after Buck who’s already heading towards the door.

“Errands to run, people to see. You know how it is.” He pretends to tip his hat, “It’s been a pleasure.”

“You can find me at the newspaper office if you change your mind, pa’ owns the *Weekly Press.”* She waves at him as he follows Buck out the building.

“Nice girl,” He comments idly, thinking more about the way he sort of *would* have liked a ride in the *Lincoln* because it’s a really nice car. It’s not every day he gets offered something like that. He misses the base jeeps, misses being able to just commandeer one and go wherever he pleased.

“Rich folk,” Buck says with enough disdain in his tone that it surprises John.

“You in a hurry?” He asks instead of diving into the other’s contempt.

“No, no.” The other shakes his head and looks around before tugging Bucky by the sleeve of his jacket a little further away from the entrance to the shop. “No, I just… I don’t want-”

He watches as the other runs a hand through his hair, seemingly frustrated with something, unable to get the words out. John keeps silent and patient, knowing innately that this is somehow related to whatever Buck’s little *problem he’s not talking about* is.

“I can’t do that again.” The other composes after a few moments and then comes back with an intense look about him. He stares straight at John’s eyes as he speaks, rooting him to the spot – as if he’s ever been able to look away when Buck was speaking. “I can’t just fuck off back to your house when you inevitably end up… you know.” The other shrugs, “When you take her home.”

He winces, knows that his entire face has just contorted into a grimace because *goddamn, he was not expecting that.* And it’s – it *is* familiar, what Gale’s describing. Countless nights where he’d begged Buck to accompany him to a pub for troop *morale* only to leave halfway through the evening, drunk and with a girl under his arm. Only to ditch Gale when being next to him had started giving him too many ideas, when touching him so causally and not being rejected became too much for his self-control. And he knew Buck suffered through it in silence, he knew that the other was annoyed because he’d always be there in the morning with a stern glare directed John’s way. But Buck never stopped going out with him and the rest of the guys, would almost always relent when John insisted.

Bucky knows why he asked, why he wanted Gale there – even though he’d leave him after a while like an asshole. But he never knew why, exactly, Buck came out with him as often as he did. *Well*, he muses, *someone had to keep me in line.*

“I won’t – I wouldn’t.” He places a hand on the other’s shoulder,

shaking him a little. “Not anymore.”

“John, she was gorgeous, of course you would have.” Gale rolls his eyes but his expression remains resigned despite the light tease.

And how does Bucky go about saying *not when you’re here, not when I can spend the day with you instead* without it sounding like a declaration of his undying love? He tugs the other into a brief hug before pushing away with a playful shove, doing everything he can to ease the tension.

“While you’re dead-right about her being a stunner, I promise I’m – I don’t do that shit now. Haven’t since – since before.” He stresses the *before* making sure that the other knows he’s serious about it.

Gale stares at him for a moment longer before nodding, “Alright. I’m sorry, I just…”

“*Buck*. I – I’ve been a bastard about this in the past.” Sounding reassuring hasn’t always been his strong suit but he tries now.

It would be much easier to get defensive, to insist that Buck didn’t need to be there for him all those times but that would be hypocritical since it was *him* who’d always asked. So he doesn’t do that. Admitting to his own shitty behavior is infinitely more difficult, though, and as tempting as not doing it is – he’s not that person anymore. As has become startlingly obvious to him in the past few months.

“Alright,” Buck nods again and this time it looks like it’s final. His expression eases into a reserved smile instead of the blank look of sternness he usually wears when he’s being serious. “What’s next on the agenda, then?”

He sighs, relieved that Buck believes him. Relieved that he’s managed to talk around the topic in a way that doesn’t give out too much about exactly what he’s feeling. “Well, first, we’re going to a diner and getting a nice, big American burger. And then, grocery shopping. The fridge’s been looking a little sparse these days.”

“You did only have sausages, eggs, milk and butter in there when I looked this morning.”

“Noticed that, did you?”

“The moths practically flew out at me.”

“Hey, now!”

Buck, as it turns out, is more than a little adept at cooking actual meals.

And he’d never thought about it, but it makes sense in retrospect. Considering how Gale grew up, what his father was like, the absent mother. He had to fend for himself for most of his life. And while Bucky’s alright at it now, he’s had to throw out more casseroles and breads than he’d like to admit.

“Cornbread?” He peers into the bowl where Buck’s been mixing ingredients, eyeing the flour and butter.

“Easier than regular dough,” The other smiles, nudging him back with his hip and reminding him of his own task – which is cutting up the meat into evenly-sized cubes.

“You don’t have to.” He says again, much like he had when they’d been on the bus ride home, the sun already low in the sky.

“I’m not letting you do everything on your own, Bucky.” The other waves a wooden spoon in his face to further his point. “’Sides, this way we won’t have to cook tomorrow when we get back.”

“Aw, Buck, I never asked you to come with me.” He washes his hands from the meat juices, washing the knife while he’s at it.

“I’m not gonna be waiting around for you, that’s for sure.” The other pours the batter into the small baking tray. He watches as the other shakes the tray, making sure the batter is evenly spread with surprising dedication to the task.

There’s more to Buck’s tone than he’s letting on. John can tell. He can tell because the other’s gripping the spoon for dear life and staring down at the cornbread like it’s offended him. To be fair, Gale’s not exactly making it *difficult* to tell.

“If anyone knows their way around a farm, it’d be you, I guess.” He hums, getting out the big pot for the stew.

“Damn straight,” Buck declares before smirking at him, his grip relaxing. “More than a city boy like *you*, I reckon.”

“Hey, now.” He buries two fingers into the other’s sides just to watch

him squirm and breathe out a laugh.

“Outta the way or get the oven.” Gale instructs and he obeys with an exaggerated bow, swiping at the door and placing another two pieces of wood into the little compartment under the oven opening.

The pot on top gets filled with the rest of the ingredients needed for the stew and then it’s just them again with nothing to do. Relying on bad habits seems as good a distraction as any so he exits into the evening air for a smoke again.

Just like that morning, Buck follows after procuring a blanket for John and one of John’s jackets for himself. They sit in silence for a while, John finishing off one and then starting on a new cigarette. They’re interrupted by a chirped little *mrrp* before the large orange menace that is the barn cat jumps up directly into Buck’s lap.

“Oh!” The other jolts, shaking the swing a little but settles down as if he’s being commanded. “Hello, darlin’.” He croons at the cat and John’s knees jerk at the pet name, eyes wide at hearing it. He’s never heard Gale use anything like it before, not even for Marge – Marge was always just *Marge,* Buck’s girl. And hearing it now, directed at a cat and sounding *so soft,* has him very close to releasing an embarrassing noise.

“*Caramel*,” He croaks out, clearing his throat. “Ben’s taken to calling her Caramel or Cara.”

“She’s lovely,” Gale’s smile widens when the cat lets out a little meow as if she’s agreeing with him.

“Pretty sure she’s due, soon. Look at the size of her.” He reaches over and lets Caramel bump into his hand, scenting him before giving him a little nip and then moving on like nothing happened.

“’S what you get.” Buck peers up at him with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Being mean to such a beautiful girl.”

Oh, Good Lord in Heavens, he thinks, feeling faint at the rumble of the other’s tone. This is so much worse than he could have predicted. He has to look away, has to distract himself by taking a deep drag from his cigarette because Buck’s just being entirely *too much* for him at the moment.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do with a bunch of kittens running around.” He sighs, thinking about how his family usually dealt with

unwanted litters. *No, definitely not doing that.*

"We'll think of something." Buck bends down, pecking the cat on her dusty head as she pushes up into the motion.

We, Buck had said, taking responsibility as he usually does. *We,* he said as if he's going to be here for long enough to deal with them. *We,* like they really are a *we* again, the Buckies, the commanders, the Majors.

Putting the butt out on the wood of the swing, he gets up. He drapes the blanket over Buck's shoulder and gives the cat one last pet. "Gonna check the stew."

"Wash your hands."

"*Yessir*." When he wants to grin and say *of course, darlin'* in that same tone Buck had used to talk to Caramel.

"Where'd you find this guy?"

"Wyoming," He grins, feeling unreasonably proud as Buck proves himself to be adept at cattle wrangling. They've been at this for hours already and the other's not showing any signs of faltering, helping with every new one that they herd his way.

"Not what I'm asking, John," Marty grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest.

Buck straddles the calf, urging it gently into the head gate, patting its side gently as some of the other farmhands prepare the branding iron. He looks unmovable even as the spooked calf bucks under him, as still as a statue, whispering to the animal in order to calm it down.

Just like he'd hushed sweetly to Bucky that morning.

He frowns, twisting his neck left and right, trying to get rid of the stiffness in his spine.

He'd ended up sleeping on the couch in the living room, his own bed too soft again, too large for him alone to occupy. The rough material under his cheek hadn't helped, however. Instead, it had reminded him too much of the Stalag blankets, brought too many bad memories to the forefront, caused the nightmares.

He'd woken with flashes of blood, of dirt and of Buck's blue eyes

drained of life still clouding his vision even as Gale had tried so hard to be *gentle* when waking him up. The near-silent *It's alright, Bucky, you're safe here* had been repeated enough that Buck's voice had been rough by the time John had come to himself. They'd had breakfast in tense silence. He knew Gale wanted to ask him about it but Bucky assumes he'd looked miserable enough that the other had left him alone. They'd said their *hellos* to Ben and then made the thirty-five minute trek to the Thomson farm.

"The army," He winces as the calf releases a chilling noise at the brand making contact with hide. "Where'd you get the extra heads?"

"Auction," Marty hums, "One of the neighboring farms is cutting down on production. A bargain."

"And is the, uh, branding necessary?" He knows it's technically *him* that Marty had asked to help a few days ago on account of several of his farmhands quitting to go further their education – or something similar, John wasn't necessarily paying attention past *cattle branding.*

"Mm," The man nods, pointing to the vast pasture behind the property. "We release them back there with the other farms in the area. The brand's ownership. Protecting our property."

"From cattle rustlers?" He grins when Marty snorts out a laugh.

"Watched one too many western, did you?"

"Just the good ones."

"We've got a runner!" Someone calls and he jolts, looking to where one of the heads has managed to slip past the farmhands, running amok, heading straight for an open gate in the distance.

"Shit!" Marty starts up a light jog to get closer but the man's old, he can't do much, and John's self-aware enough to know that he'd only get in the way.

A loud neigh reaches their ears and both him and Marty freeze as Buck's speeds past them on a cream-colored horse. He doesn't know what had spooked the bull but he's booking it for the gate at full speed in a panic, erratic in its movements. This, however, doesn't seem to be a problem for Gale who pushes the horse faster and harder until he's right next to the young bull.

John watches, mouth agape, as Buck reaches over until he's got one

arm around the bull's horns and neck, and then proceeds to drop from the horse. The hold and the heel digging into the dirt slow the animal's momentum down, making it halt, but it doesn't stop struggling so Gale twists the thing's head up, unbalancing the bull until they both go down into the mud. The bull struggles with all four legs in the air for a moment before the several other farmhands that had ridden out after him reach the two. They get the rope around the animal's neck and it's all over in a matter of moments, but to John it feels like an eternity's passed.

He lets out the breath he didn't realize he was holding just as Marty whistles, the noise piercing and calling back the horse that had been set loose when Buck had tackled the animal on the run.

"Buck!" John wheezes and rushes to meet the other as he approaches because it's only now occurred him how dangerous that stunt was. He jogs the last stretch of land between them, hands already out and ready to pat the other down to check for injuries. "What the fuck was that?! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, John." The other's grinning. His face is streaked in mud, his clothes soaked through and there's a tear in his (John's) jacket sleeve but the other's smiling like it's the best day of his life.

"Why would you – a bull?!" He splutters, waving a hand at the animal being led away.

"A steer, actually. Neutered." The other informs him efficiently and John's eye twitches.

"Oh, I'm so glad you had the time to check while you were *wrestling with it in the mud*!" He reaches out and smacks the other's shoulder, the shock in his system at seeing Gale do something like that slowly abating and leaving him shaky.

"Nothin' I haven't done before." Buck shrugs, hands on his hips as they watch the runaway steer get branded. "Didn't mean to worry you, Bucky." He amends with his eyes all rounded and genuine, and – John could never really stay mad at him.

"Didn't have the time to be worried," He runs a hand over his face with a sigh. "It was done an' over with in under thirty."

"Not a bad time," The other looks down at himself, frowning at the mess and John has to stop himself from pushing back his hair so it isn't sticking to his forehead anymore, eager for another glimpse of

the kindest blue known to man. *Heavens.*

“You need to get out of those,” He nods towards the house, “Maybe Peg will have something for you.”

Gale gets pats on the back and a volley of several different words of congratulations on his performance as if this really *is* a rodeo. He’s bashful about it, ruffling his hair and biting his bottom lip before shying away from the praise.

“There was no reason to do all-a-that,” Marty’s grumbling is mostly for show. “Someone would-a found ‘im eventually.”

“Respectfully, sir, you trusted me with keeping your cattle safe so that’s what I did.” Buck’s words are firm and his posture proud. John can easily imagine him before the army, before the air force, gangly but still so responsible and honest. Would he still be on a ranch somewhere in Wyoming if it hadn’t been for the war? Would he have moved on to doing rodeos since he seemed so at home wrestling beasts?

“You army types,” Marty shakes his head and walks away, muttering under his breath all the while.

“Think that’s just you, personally.” He quips to see Gale shake off the grim determination with an easy grin.

Peg gasps when she sees them, eyes round with worry. “Oh my, what in the world happened?”

“Buck here decided to dabble in steer wrangling,” He states proudly even as Gale rolls his eyes.

Peg had immediately loved Buck. It’s not a surprise in the slightest. Not with the way he’d met her, that winning smile of his at full power, downturned eyebrows as if to say *who? Little ol’ me?* She’d been smitten immediately, helpless to the other’s gentle praise of her house and the crochet she was working on when he’d introduced them. John hopes that Buck knows just how effortlessly charming he is, how everyone stops and *looks* when he walks by. Why everyone listens when he speaks, how he commands a room. He hopes the other knows and chooses to not weaponize it. Because thinking of the other being *unaware* makes John feel out of sorts. Makes him think that nobody’s ever praised Buck enough or at all.

“We were wondering if you had any clothes to spare.” Gale motions

down to himself and Peg hides her grin behind her palm.

“Yes, of course. Just drop those outside and I’ll be right back with something.” She hurries further into the house and John steps back to give Gale enough room to maneuver.

The other takes off his jacket and leaves it hanging on the rocking chair’s back before he shucks his boots so that he can step out of his jeans. He looks away which is perhaps stupid – they’ve shared barracks for years, they’ve showered together and lived in each other’s pockets for more years than was probably warranted – he doesn’t need to look away. And yet, the heat flushing through him is intense enough a reminder of exactly how long it had taken him to grow used to seeing Buck in a state of undress. A reminder that he no longer has that resistance.

“You’d do that often, before?” He asks to distract himself.

“When they needed me to.” Buck holds something out for him to take and he realizes it’s the other’s dog tags, also muddy around the chain where they’d gotten loose from under his collar. “Was the fastest on and off a horse.”

“Never told me about it,” He’s not petulant – *he’s not a child* – but this seems like a skill that he’d have liked knowing about, just like the piano.

“Never really came up and I never did it for sport,” Buck enters his periphery and takes the dog tags back, using the clean part of his flannel to wipe them, and then his face, down.

“Thought we were above keeping secrets,” Leaning back against the house, he finally meets Gale’s gaze.

The other has his eyebrows furrowed and John realizes he might have come across as a little too *bitter* instead of the casual tone he was aiming for. Clearing his throat he thinks about what he could say to fix it.

“Hm, guess that’s fine. There’s things about me you don’t know either.”

Well, *that* certainly wasn’t it, judging by how the other’s eyebrows now shoot into his hairline, expression morphing into something incredulous. Gale opens his mouth to ask but Peg’s arrival interrupts him from voicing whatever he’d been about to.

“Here, these should fit.” She hands him a pair of jeans and a new jacket, denim lined with sheepskin and worn at the sleeves like it’d been well-loved.

“Thank you so much, Peg.” Buck accepts the offered items, “I’ll have them back to you as soon as I wash ‘em.”

Peg waves him off, shaking her head. “No, no need. You two helped us out today plenty, consider this as a thank you.” Her smile turns sad then, the transition into it so clear on her lined face. “Besides, nobody around here to wear ‘em anymore.”

“Oh,” He sucks in a sharp breath at the reminder of Peg’s son. “Are you sure, Peg?”

“Yes, yes.” She pulls out a handkerchief and wipes under her eyes, smiling at Gale who’s donned the jacket. “You look so handsome.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Buck looks between the two of them, unsure.

“Are you sure you’re not staying for dinner?” She asks, hopeful. And John hates to leave a dame disappointed but – he sort-of doesn’t want to share Buck’s company with anyone else today. Especially after all of that.

“Nah, we’ve got leftovers that need to be taken care of. Thank you for the invite, though.” He clasps a hand to Buck’s shoulder and steers him around. “We’ll see ya soon!”

“Goodbye, Peg, thanks again.” Buck’s parting words are mostly drowned out by a passing truck that stops next to them.

“You boys need a ride?” One of the farmhands offers and, well, it beats walking.

They hop into the back and Gale sighs with his eyes closed, leaning back against the wooden sides, finally showing signs of slowing down.

He observes his profile, the slope of his nose, the shape of his lips. He knows he’s staring but he can’t help it – he can never resist lookin’ at Gale, no better than the rest of ‘em can.

“Still got dirt on your face,” He licks his thumb and reaches out, wiping the other’s chin. Gale’s eyes snap open and turn to him. They’re too close together, he realizes. They’re practically breathing the same air as the truck rumbles down the road and John’s hand is

cradling Buck's face. He swallows, moving his thumb up to the bridge of the other's nose, rubbing there as well.

"Need a nice, long shower." He hushes, afraid of speaking louder as Buck stares back at him with the full force of his icy gaze.

"Do you really mind?" The other asks, voice just as quiet. "That I don't tell you everything."

He feels his mouth flatten and he has to make a conscious effort not to grimace. "No. No man should lay himself bare like that, least of all if he's not gettin' anything in return."

Gale nods, blinking slowly and looking away. "Your hair's getting long."

The non-sequitur takes him aback some but he lets the diversion slide. "Wanna cut it for me?"

"No," Gale's denial is immediate and firm. "Suits you this way, I think."

"You think?" He prods at the other and Gale swats him away. "What? You can't tell if I'm more handsome or not? Or is it that I'm just always at my peak handsome and you're blind to it?"

The other laughs, pushing him slightly, making him sway until they come back with their shoulders pressed together. "You're as handsome as your ego is big."

"Oh, high praise from Gale Cleven himself!" He croons, feeling light despite the day having been a whirlwind.

"I'd tell you not to get a big head, but it's already too late for that."

"So *mean!"*

Buck's out back with Caramel when he comes to get him. She's laid out on her side, stomach big, and round, and prominent as Gale croons at her. She's looking like she's about to pop and John can't imagine she's having fun with it.

"Get your kit on, we're going to town." He crouches down next to the other, ruffling the fur along Caramel's belly as she purrs.

"Groceries again?"

“Nah, I gotta make a call.”

Buck eyes him warily but John keeps quiet on the topic, chatters about the weather and Caramel and *Dice* as they make it to the bus.

Over the few weeks that he’d been making these calls to Croz and his wife, he’d managed to locate the perfect telephone booth to do it from. He’d kept that first interaction with the impatient old bat in the back of his head as he’d scoured the city. His optimally placed phone booth is located behind a closed down bar with boarded up windows and doors, out of the way of every major store and main streets so that nobody will bother him. It’s a bit of a walk but Buck doesn’t complain, just patiently keeps pace with John’s own long strides.

He keeps the booth door open and grins at Gale as the other raises an eyebrow at him, suspicious.

Croz picks up on the third ring as he usually does, greeting him with a chipper *Bucky!* Just as he’s done since they’ve begun having these calls regularly.

“*We just had a massive storm here a couple of days ago.”* Croz starts before John can even get a greeting in, eager to rattle off what’s new in his life. “*The phone lines went down for a while but they managed to fix ‘em right up just yesterday.”*

“That’s a relief,” He grins, winking at Buck, “I would hate to miss our weekly little rendezvous.”

“*I know! Jean almost called the city council when it was lookin’ like they weren’t gonna do it in time!”* Croz’s exasperated sigh is fond even over the line and John hums.

“Hey, uh.” He eyes Gale before motioning for the other to squeeze in next to him. “I got someone here who wants to speak with ya.”

“*Huh?”*

“John?” Buck fumbles with the phone as Bucky shoves it at him, bringing it up to his ear reluctantly. “Hello?” The other asks, trepidation clear in his expression.

“*Holy shit!”* John can hear the exclamation from where he’s pressed along Buck’s right side, not an inch of space between them. “*Buck!”*

“Croz?!” Buck exhales a laugh, face lighting up. “Well, I’ll be

damned."

"*I'll say! It's good to head your voice! How have you been, wait-"* There's a commotion from the other end of the line which he assumes is Crosby getting comfortable. "*Wait, you're with Bucky right now!*"

"Sure am," Gale grins, his hold on the phone tightening as he leans into Bucky a little. "It's good to hear you, too, Croz. How's the family? Jean and the little guy?"

"*Oh, they're doing great. I just – wow, Jean's gonna be mad she's missing this."* Harry huffs, sounding both amused and regretful. And John can imagine she's going to be badgering him for details once she's back home.

"And where's the missus, if I may ask?"

"*She went to the farmer's market with Rosie, so I'm stuck home watching the little tyke."* Croz grumbles even though John knows how much he loves spending time with his kid when he can, loves to tell John about it, too.

"Rosenthal's with you?" Gale's eyes widen, as surprised as Bucky was when he'd received the photo of them all together. He's surprised Buck hadn't seen it yet, but they'd hardly spent much time in the house since he'd gotten here.

"*He's from New York; made sense to stick together."* Crosby elaborates with the ease of someone who's had to sell this whole story time and time again. "*Sides, Jean likes 'im. Talks to him about jazz and shit, books I could never get into."*

"He always was an, ah, outstanding guy." Buck hums and John knows what the other's thinking about.

Rosie the Indomitable. The fucker that flew his twenty-five, then flew twenty-five more just because he could, just because there was no one else who'd do it as reliably as him. Not only did Rosie beat the odds, he'd knocked everyone else off the board, too. As much as John's proud of the guy, he's also envious. Because that should have been him and Buck, should have been the two of them uncontested once the Luftwaffe was out of the picture.

"*Still is!"* Croz sounds fond as he continues singing the man's praises and Buck lets him yap, always a good listener.

The two of them go back and forth, talking around anything that reminds them of the war but also, curiously, around why he's here with Bucky. It makes sense. If Gale won't tell *him* yet, then he sure as hell won't tell Croz either. Much less over the telephone.

"*Man, I would have paid to see that!"* Croz whines once Gale's finished regaling him with the story of his steer wrestling escapade from yesterday. "*Bet Bucky blew a gasket."*

"He certainly wasn't happy." Gale smirks at him and he rolls his eyes.

"If you wanted a roll in the mud, you could've just said so." He sneers and Buck elbows him in the gut lightly.

"Oh, yeah? You would-a wrestled me instead?" Gale's grin turns sharp, staring him dead in the eyes. *Like in the Stalag,* neither of them says, *when I cracked your rib and you cracked me in the nose.*

"I'd make a better partner than the steer." He bares his teeth in victory when Gale scoffs, the corners of his mouth lift up.

"You wouldn't last the thirty seconds the steer did."

"Wow, alright!" He reaches out, clenching his hands around Gale's waist in preparation of lifting him up and out of the phone booth but Gale plants his knee in John's thigh and then they're scrabbling in the enclosed space like children.

"Guys." Croz tries, "*Guys!*" The second try reaches them because it's loud enough to pierce through Gale's determination not to let Bucky manhandle him.

"Sorry, Croz." He takes the phone out of the other's hold and finally manages to push the other out of the booth with a hip-check. He closes the door and sticks his tongue out at Gale who flips him off, still grinning and looking ruffled.

"*Back to how it was, huh?"* Croz's tone is fond and mournful at the same time.

He turns away from Gale, determined not to let the other see his faltering expression. "Yeah, I guess so."

"*… you sure you're alright? I mean, the first time we talked you said he hadn't been in contact. What changed?"* Bless Croz's heart for being so worried, so kind.

“I’m fine, I swear.” He taps his foot against the ground impatiently. “And as soon as I find out, I’ll let you know.”

“*Alright, Bucky. Alright.”* The other sighs again, heavy this time. “*I’ll talk to you next week.”*

“Bye, Croz. Send our sincerest greetings to Jean and tell her we missed her terribly.”

“Goodbye, Bucky!”

Croz hangs the line up first and John follows suit, letting the morose way his heart’s clenching in his chest ease before he leaves the booth.

“You could have just told me were coming out here to talk with Crosby.” Gale crosses his arms over his chest, his new-old denim sheepskin fitting over his shoulders snugly.

“Where’s the fun in that?” He shrugs and Buck flicks him on the forehead.

“I could’ve prepared better.”

“Ain’t an interview, Buck.” He shakes his head nudges the other back towards the more populated part of town.

He shows the other the photo Croz had sent him once they’re back home. Hands him the frame and watches how the other takes the figures in the picture in, thumb caressing the glass. Gale smiles, a gentle thing, something equal parts proud and nostalgic. Buck looks down at the frame again as well, enjoying how the figures there are so intertwined, how they make it obvious how involved they all are in each other’s lives. Jean’s holding the baby in the middle of the photo, on her right stands Harry, his right hand placed over hers where she’s cradling the infant. On her left is Rosie, grin big and beaming, on hand on his hip the other on Croz’s shoulder. The two of them are in uniform, striking a handsome visage. John had thrown his own into the attic, determined not to ever see it again. Determined to put it all behind him.

“Do you think Rosie’s living with them?” He asks idly, the question that's been in John's head since he’d received the photo leaving the other's mouth instead.

“Could be,” He shrugs and puts the frame down again, ambling over to the couch and dropping down onto the dusty cushions. “Croz got all

shifty when I asked."

"Maybe he think it's a weird thing to admit to." Buck motions to the radio and John obediently turns it on to the last station it was playing, letting the jazz music fill the room. They're going to have to start lighting a fire soon, the weather growing colder by the day.

"They shared barracks for years," He points out, sitting down next to the other.

"This ain't the military," The other stretches back until he's gotten his fingers onto the blanket that had been left on the armchair. "We're all civilians now."

"Maybe they needed help with the baby," Another idea thrown out between them, another light frown from Gale. "What? You don't think so?"

Buck pauses, chewing on his bottom lip. "I think they're *living together."*

"What, like us?" He quirks an eyebrow, not following.

"No, not like us." Buck's cheeks grow pink and he looks away, huddling under the blanket. "Like all of them, *together*."

He sucks in a sharp breath, eyes cutting to the photo on the shelf, the way they're all touching at least a little. It's not – it's not something he'd thought about and he can't believe-

"No," He shakes his head in denial. "No way."

Buck glares at him, "When I got back from – when I got back. The two of them were close. They were best friends at that point, been through so much shit together. *It makes sense."* The other insists and John has to take a metaphorical step back, shocked at such a strong reaction from the other.

"Well, shit." He taps his foot against the ground, following the beat of the song playing. "Maybe you're right."

A moment of silence builds tension between them, John thinking about how the three of them would work together, and Gale – hell, John's struggling to tell what's going on through the other's head.

"You don't… mind?" Buck asks, muffled by the blanket he's pulled up

under his nose.

“That they’re…? Nah.” He grins and doesn’t say *would be hypocritical of me*. “Croz is a friend, if he’s happy, I’m happy.”

Gale hums, letting the blanket lower. He stares at John, something unreadable in his eyes. He looks like he wants to say something else, like there are so many things that want to leave his mouth but in the end he just nods and gets up.

“Pancakes for dinner alright?”

“I’ll eat whatever you feed me, you know that.”

Buck’s stare stays with him until he’s lying in bed and trying to parse through it. The other’s eyes had only gotten that way two times that Bucky can remember. once when they were being ushered into a bomb shelter and Buck had told him about his father, and the other when they were freezing on a train and being moved from Stalag to Stalag, saying that he couldn’t have done it without John.

Gale might not want to speak about it, but his eyes are honest. Which means John was right in his initial assessment of the problem. It’s something serious, it’s something that needs to marinate in Gale’s head before it leaves his mouth.

He’s comforted, in a way, to see the other struggle with not talking about. It means that Gale does want to, and it means that all he needs to do to hear it is be patient.

There’s a knocking at his door, accompanied by Gale’s soft voice calling his name, that wakes him in the morning. He groans as he burrows further into the covers, hiding himself away from the new day. He’s back to dozing off again when the door opens. He’s just on the precipice of sleep as the bed dips by his head.

“Bucky,” Gale hushes, shaking him by the shoulder and he refuses to budge. “The man from the shop brought the truck tires over. Ben got them into the barn but you should probably get up.”

He sighs, peeking out from under the duvet. “What time’s it?”

“Almost eleven.” The other’s hand lingers on his shoulder and when Bucky grumbles, pulling the covers over his eyes, he tugs them down and out of his grip. “I saved you some breakfast, come on.”

He stares up at the other with a pout and Gale just looks at him patiently, expectantly. He'd rather not get up. In fact, he's real fucking comfortable in bed. He knew, the moment he woke up, that it was going to be one of those lethargic days where he's struggling to do anything.

"What is it?" Buck tilts towards him, concern coloring his expression. "Nightmares again?"

He shakes his head, not wanting to elaborate but also not wanting to leave Gale without an answer when he's being so kind. The other hums and then – he lies down on top of the covers, forcing John to meet his gaze.

"The mechanic checked the truck over," Buck starts, slow and measured, quiet as to not disturb the air with his tone. Which then has the unfortunate consequence of making his voice low and rumbling, putting John right back to sleep. "Ben walked him through what you two did. He was real impressed. Said that she's a beauty despite the rust. Offered to clear it up for you if you get her to the shop."

"Her," He croaks, chucking.

"An old beauty," Buck grins, plush lips pulled taut by the strength of it.

It makes him stupid, having Buck in bed with him, waking up to him like this. He's going to lose his mind once the other's gone again. He's already gotten used to him, gotten used to cooking together, to spending time on the porch together under blankets with the cat. It's going to hurt something fierce.

"Grandpa got her after the first war," He bites his lip, trying to remember. "But he got – he got worse instead of better the longer he was home. Started being scared of crowds, the city was too loud. He never did take her out more than two or three times."

"Time got to her, huh?" Buck's hand rises slowly and John tracks its trajectory. He stops breathing when it makes contact with his curls where they're in a disarray over his forehead. Buck moves the hair away, pouting when it just springs back to where it was, stubborn.

"Time, the hole in the roof lettin' the rain in, the rats," He shrugs, trying to keep his heart rate under control. "Felt bad just leaving her to rot. Felt wrong just leaving it. This whole place…" His mouth stops working, teeth clacking together as the words die in his throat.

Buck observes him quietly, keeping the peace. His hand's moved to lie between them on the covers but Bucky can still feel the ghost of his touch, the locks he's displaced. He has to move, has to do something to feel normal again or he'll fuck this all up.

He has to grip his own wrist under the covers until he feels the bones in there grinding together in order to finally speak. "It's just. Memories, legacy, all this other shit I never had the privilege of thinking about. And this house is – it's what I have to my name."

"You're not your possessions, John." Buck frowns, the hand against the bedding clenching into a fist.

"'S all I have left, though." He screws his eyes shut, fighting back the headache uselessly.

"I'm sorry about your grandma, Bucky," Gale continues in that soft, gravelly tone of his and John pauses at the other's words. "I would have loved to meet her, but John, you're so much more than what you have to your name. You're your experiences, your opinions, every damn thing you love and hate. You're a person and you're my best friend. So don't go talkin' bad about him, you hear?"

He read the letters, is the first thing he thinks. Gale had received the letters and for whatever reason, opted to not respond to them. Opted to just show up instead. This is the closes they've gotten to talking about *The Problem,* as John's started calling it in the confines of his own head.

"Best friend, huh?" He grins, teasing and Buck rolls his eyes, ducking away from him in embarrassment.

"You getting up or should I tell Ben to get on with his day?"

"Depends on what's for breakfast."

"Oatmeal."

"I'll stay in bed, thanks." He tugs the covers back up and Buck laughs, pulling them off his frame completely, exposing him to the cold air. He starts up a shiver as Buck leaves the room, taking the sound of his chuckling with him.

Switching out the tires takes them about an hour. Between finding the jack somewhere in the barn, unscrewing the old, rusted stuck bolts

and keeping the cat from scratching up the already-cracked upholstery, the three of them are sweating by the time they put the last rim on the truck.

He wipes his hands onto his jeans and takes a step back. Wincing, he eyes Ben and Buck for a second opinion. Ben's beaming, proud but Buck has a similar expression to his own. It looks stupid, is the thing. The new shiny rims and dark rubber standing out too starkly on the old truck.

"I'm sure she'll be a looker with a fresh coat of paint on her." Gale claps him on the back, optimistic in his observations.

"As long as she runs, I don't care what she looks like." He finds it funny, then, that they're insisting the truck is a *she.* It feels silly but Gale had started it and John's not going to ruin his fun.

"She's perfect," Ben sighs. "I just – I've never gotten to work on a car like this. I know she's not mine but, I'm still real proud, you know?" The kid shrugs sheepishly and Bucky's grin widens, feeling incredibly endeared at the other's genuine joy.

He motions to the truck. "Want a ride to Marty's?"

"Yes!" The other clambers into the back and he watches as the kid settles down, ready to go.

Buck rounds the truck with a chuckle, getting in on the passenger side. "Smart kid, why's he not in college?"

"Nah, he likes the animals more." He starts the truck up and peels out of the barn slowly, making sure not to clip the mirrors onto the doors. *Dice* watches them from her pen, quietly amused as the truck rumbles. She must be. It has to be strange to see this stationary thing that's been there since she was a colt finally moving.

The truck makes a concerning noise climbing up onto the asphalt of the road and all three of them freeze, but the truck doesn't die and then they're off down the road. John whoops and Buck grins at him, patting the dashboard fondly like he'd contributed. Well, he might not have, but he does seem happy for Bucky and Ben.

He slams the horn once they're in front of the house and Ban jumps out of the back as Peg and Marty exit the house, looking worried.

"Oh!" Peg exclaims, hands clasped against her chest. "You boys did

it!”

“Ain’t she a beauty?” Ben whistles, patting the side of the truck.

“It’s somethin’ alright,” Marty grumbles but he, too, seems reluctantly impressed. “Good job.”

“I’ll see ya’ tomorrow!” Ben waves them off.

“Wait there a moment!” Peg hurries back inside and then comes out with a couple of jars of something. “I was meanin’ to bring these over but you can take ‘em now.”

“Thank you kindly, Peg.” Gale smiles, accepting the jars.

“These are pickled cherries, apricot jam, strawberry jam and cherry jam. And here,” She hands Buck something wrapped in a dish towel as well. “Freshly baked.”

“You shouldn’t have, Peg.” He winces, still feeling so odd at being given all of these things so freely, just because it’s the *neighborly* thing to do.

“Well, I wanted to, *Bucky.”* He winks, patting Gale’s cheek through the window. “Take the truck out somewhere, have some food and relax while the weather’s still nice enough.”

“Will do,” He salutes her and she laughs behind her hand, “Thanks again.”

“Bye, boys!”

So he takes Peg’s advice and drives them around the area. He drives until there are no more houses and farms, until there is only the forest surrounding them on both sides. He stops the truck once he finds a dirt path branching off from the main road and goes down it slowly, further among the trees.

Once he stops the car, he notices that Buck’s wincing at something.

“You alright?” He asks, cautious and the other nods, seemingly steeling himself.

“Reminds me of – of after we got away. Not really, not in the – these trees ain’t coniferous but the lack of sunlight. Thick treetops.” The other admits and Bucky could smack himself for forgetting. He’d been in a similar situation but he had the privilege – as unfortunate as it is

– of having those memories blurry, of suffering the consequences of a concussion.

“We can go back, go down by the lake instead.” He offers, already reaching to start the car up again.

“No, no. I think there’s a meadow up ahead.” Gale points to the distance and John can see green peeking through the rough bark of the dense forest.

“If you’re sure,” He takes the bread and two of the jars from the other, getting out of the truck and waiting for Buck to do the same.

The meadow is beautiful. It’s an imperfect circle encased by the trees, a little creek running alongside the tree line at the far end of it. It’s filled with wildflowers that are hardy enough to still weather the cold but they too have started losing their shine. The sun beams down at them and John feels like he’s stepped into a parallel world of some sort, like he’s lost in a dream. The good kind, the kind where everything is hazy with the feeling of mystery and wonder.

He sits down, not mining the grass stains on his pants and motions for Gale to do the same. The other follows, looking around with wide eyes. He watches Buck watching the birds fly overhead, the leaves that have slowly started going yellow and have begun their descent onto the forest ground. It really is beautiful but in John’s eyes, there’s only one thing worth his attention in that meadow.

He takes the bread out from the cloth and frowns. It’s not really *bread* as he knows it, he couldn’t call it *not-bread* either but it’s definitely different. It’s a work of art, first and foremost – sections of it baked to make it look like roses with rolled dough and a braided crown around the edge – and it’s golden brown on top, shining like his homemade bread never did. It’s also weightier than any bread he’s had.

Buck hums, reaching over and accepts the round bread from his hands. “I’ve seen these before. One of the neighbors in Casper was orthodox. They used make these for the *slava.*” Buck’s lips shape the foreign word awkwardly and John is enraptured by the new information he’s being granted. “*Kolač* or something like that, they’d called it. Cake. The celebration is in honor of the family’s patron saint usually. Or all the big ones like Christmas. Wonder if today’s Peg’s patron’s day.”

“So it’s bread?” He says stupidly and Buck rolls his eyes.

“Yes, it’s bread but it’s also thicker, more significant. Here.” He holds the loaf out and John accepts it in both hands, perplexed when Buck doesn’t let go. “You’re supposed to spin it around several times before splitting it in halves, then quarters, together.” The other bends the bread after they’ve spun it three times and it tears across the middle. They put the halves on top of one another and fold them again, snapping it into quarters.

“Why do they celebrate their patron saints?” He brings the bread in his hands to his nose, inhaling the delicious smell of buttery dough.

“You grew up Christian, shouldn’t you know?” The other opens the jar of apricot jam and takes out a Swiss army knife from the pocket of his jacket, spreading some onto the soft middle of the bread.

He shrugs, “We didn’t have anything like it. It was all *go to church* this and *confess your sins* that. And even that was only when grandma insisted.” His mom never cared when he was a kid, never forced him to get dressed up in his Sunday best and took him to be gawked at by their neighbors.

“They believe their patrons will watch over the family, give them good health. They also honor their departed by celebrating.” Gale looks down at the bread in his hands and then gives John the knife, his face set in a frown. “We break this bread in honor of those who were lost in the war. To honor those from the Bloody 100th that gave their lives so that we could be here today. To honor our friend Curt, who never got the send-off he deserved.”

John sucks in a sharp breath, staring at the other as he contemplates the food in his hold. Gale holds it up and John brings his own piece to tap against the other’s. “To everyone that is no longer with us, to Curtis Biddick, the shittiest gin player I’ve ever known.”

They lapse into silence as they chew, the sounds of the forest filling the air between them instead. It’s sad to think that this is the closest they’ll get to sending their friends and fellow soldiers off properly. The bread is delicious. The jam is sweet and slightly sour and pairs well with the buttery taste but all John can think about is how they’re here and now, alive, but wasting their time by doing nothing. *He’s* wasting time sitting next to Gale and not *saying anything.* He’s going to waste away, going to take this yearning of his into the dirt, six feet under, with him.

He opens his mouth, wishing, *hoping* that something will make it out

but immediately shuts it when he sees how misty and watery Buck's eyes are. He bites back a gasp and shuffles closer, bumping knees with the other.

"*Gale*," He hushes, wanting to reach out but scared to do so.

"It's fine, John." The other wipes across his eyes with the back of his hand. "It's just a bit of a cry."

"Aw, Buck." Awkwardly and shakily, he crawls to sit next to Gale, throwing an arm over the other's shoulders. Gale folds into him, clutching at the bread as if his life's depending on it with one hand and at Bucky's jacket with the other. "It's alright. It's fine. Let it out." He bites back a sob of his own as grief crawls into his throat.

It hurts. It hurts seeing Gale who's usually so stoic and composed cry, it hurts hearing him choking back noise as he shakes apart. His nose tingles with the sensation of the tears building up in his eyes. He drops the bread back into the cloth and takes Buck's as well, setting it aside so that he can fully wrap his arms around Buck's trembling form.

"Curt wouldn't want you crying over him," He croons lowly, burying his hand in the other's hair to hold him steady, to be his anchor. "He'd laugh in your face, slug you in the shoulder. He always talked about not being scared to die, remember? The hundredth's angel, soaring. Him and Dickie, both of 'em are up there playing craps now, I bet. Running the place down."

Buck shudders and pulls back, looking up at him with his red-rimmed eyes and his tear-stained cheeks and John – John feels like the rug's been pulled out from under him, like he's falling out of his Fort all over again. Gale's the prettiest damn sight John's ever had the privilege of laying his eyes on.

"I'm – I miss him. I miss all of them, I do." The other starts, a fresh set of tears escaping down his cheekbones. "But I'm so damned *grateful* that we're both here alive. That we both made it out."

Something possesses him then, that urge that he's kept so close to his heart and hidden under layers of performative showboating, and he cups the other's cheek to bring their foreheads together. Gale jolts against him but settles into his hold quietly, the tears petering off as they sit there with their heads connected as if he's trying to transfer thoughts directly into Buck's brain. He soaks in the warmth, the proximity, the smell of Buck's aftershave. It's all too much and not enough but at least the other's not crying anymore. Their breathing

matches up and *finally*, Gale's calm again. Finally, John can stop feeling helpless and useless.

"Wouldn't have made it this far without you, Buck." He admits, thinking back to those days where all he could do was cling to Gale's conviction and use it as his own.

"John," The other starts, sounding almost offended. "John, you got me out of there. What are you talking about? If anyone couldn't have done it without the other, it's me."

Gale doesn't know, is the thing.

He doesn't, and will probably never conceive of how much John had depended on him in that Stalag. He'll never be aware of how John needed his steady presence and daily reminders of his own personhood in those months, of how close he came to saying *fuck it* and gunning for one of the Krauts' watchtowers. It doesn't feel healthy, this thing that's festered in John's chest. The thing that's wrapped blackened tendrils around his heart, tattooed Gale's name upon the bones of his ribcage. It doesn't feel healthy and yet it feels like the most natural thing in the world to love Buck. It makes him want to live, want to stop wasting away on his own and beg for scraps of the other's attention. It makes him want to be better, to be worthy of that attention. It motivates as much as it rends him apart, his adoration for Gale. A blessing and a curse.

"What matters is we both made it." He settles on saying instead of arguing a moot point with the other. "At different times, but we're both here."

He doesn't say *I don't know what I would have done if I came back to base and found out you died before getting there,* doesn't say *I would have died looking for proof of it being a lie* because those things are for John's head only. They'll never be heard by anyone but the ghost inside his skull.

The thing about Curtis Biddick being John's go-to drinking buddy is that, well, he knew how John felt about Buck. Even before John had outright said it on one drunken night spent in Curt's company, Curt had somehow known. And John prided himself – still does – on the fact that he had his feelings under control, so it was somewhat of a shock to the system when Curt had, upon hearing John's inebriated spiel about his profound feelings, responded with *Yeah, I know. That's rough.*

Curt knew that Bucky was at Gale's mercy, that he was at his beck and call, that he'd heel if the other so wished. And he'd mocked him for it relentlessly. Any time John would defer or let Buck boss him around, Curt would be there with a sly grin and a wink, making kissy faces in John's direction.

If you could see me now, Curt. He thinks, mind still fresh with the memory of yesterday's little impromptu remembrance ceremony that Buck had initiated. *You'd be laughing it up.*

"I swear you won't fall off, Bucky." Gale promises, tapping the stirrup to go over his instructions again. "Left foot in, right leg around the horse. Come on, easy does it."

"If I break anything, I'll kick your ass." He vows, doing as instructed and suddenly – he's on a horse. *Dice* readjusts to his weight and twitches her head into Buck's palm where he's petting her. He clenches his hands around the pommel and his thighs against the sides of the horse, stiff and tense.

"I'll lead you around in a circle, nice and slow. Just relax." Buck pats his knee and takes the reins. *Dice* seems confused why they're going so slowly and circling such a small area. But Bucky is grateful as he gets used to the movements of the horse, to the way it's a living, breathing thing that he's supposed to be steering places.

"I'm too old to learn a new skill," He complains even though it's not as bad as he'd assumed it would be.

"John," Buck grunts, cutting him a scathing glare. "You learned to cook and fix a car in the last few months, you're not stupid nor inept. You just have ta' give it a go."

The other's words warm him from the inside. It's almost unbelievable how much faith Gale's always had in him, how much he believed in Bucky. Even when he gave him every reason to think otherwise, Buck still stood by his opinion of him, still held John to a better standard. It's the kind of conviction a devout follower has for a God, the kind of conviction John has for Gale. It makes him feel like he's floating, but also unbearably heavy with the weight of the other's expectations.

"I'm lucky *Dice* is such a good horse," He deflects, pushing through the lump in his throat.

"You'll be running the barrels with her in no time," Buck grins up at him, the wind tousling his hair and John's breath hitches.

“Don’t count on it,” He responds, the words automated and somewhat of a joke between them.

“Do my eyes deceive me? Should I feel insulted that you chose to do this when I was supposed to be away?” Ben’s voice reaches them and John can feel *Dice* perk up at the sound of it.

“Here comes the peanut gallery,” He groans, throwing his head back.

Yes, he’d deliberately chosen a day Ben was out busy with other things. He’d done it for two reasons. One: he didn’t want Ben making fun of him when he inevitably chickened out, and two: he wanted Buck’s attention on him solely, as pathetic as that is. Besides, if anyone was going to get him on a horse, it was going to be Buck.

“Lookin’ good, Bucky! Told you you’d be a natural.” Ben grins at him, what seems to be a wreath of flowers in his hands.

“Plans got cancelled?” Buck leads the horse closer to the fence.

“Peg insisted on taking over babysitting duties,” Ben beckons Gale over and the other leans forward curiously. “Little cousin wanted to see the farms, came over from New York with her ma’, my aunt.”

Ben takes the flower wreath and bestows it upon Buck and John can only stare mutely. The flowers are the hardy kind that are leftover from summer, not nearly as pretty as daisies or forget-me-nots, but he still looks like he escaped from a fairytale. Buck’s cheeks go a little pink when he realizes what’s happening but he dons the crown dutifully. He looks like a daydream.

“You sure it’s alright to leave her?” He raises an eyebrow and Ben shrugs.

“She likes the horses on the farm, but I was hoping to show her *Eurydice*.” The shorter reaches out and *Dice* nuzzled her snout into his palm.

“Take the truck and bring her ‘round,” He suggest as if it’s his own idea instead of what Ben was aiming for bringing this up.

“Really? Shit, you’re the best, Bucky!” Ben pumps his fist into the air and hurries back towards the house to fetch the keys.

“Does he even have a license?” Buck questions and John snorts, shrugging.

“Eh, who knows.”

“I never did ask how you got her.” Gale traces a finger over the splotched patterning on *Dice’s* flank and John hums.

“Ben told me ‘bout it once.” He uses what the other has shown him and sets the horse off on a light walk along the fence line. “She was a gift. Grandpa had this friend in the army. Saved his life and all that but had to give up his horse and leave it behind. And he loved that damned horse, we still – we still have a photo of it somewhere.” He jolts when *Dice* fakes him out, twitching too suddenly at something John can’t see.

“Easy,” Gale mumbles, patting her as she settles back down.

“So this friend of his, he managed to track down where the horse ended up after the war was over.” He clears his throat, trying not to let the adrenaline rush get to him. “He couldn’t buy the horse and bring it back, but the new owners offered him a colt in the future. But by the time everything was done and ready, pops was already six feet under.”

“But you kept the horse.” Buck nods like it makes sense. And in a way, it does. It was a kind gesture, maybe the friend had thought he was paying back a life debt or something so it was logical to keep the horse even if his grandfather wasn’t around to see it.

“She’s the spittin’ image of the original horse, too.” He adds, making a note to try and find the photo.

“Not many Paints in the army,” Gale points out and John’s not shocked to hear that the other’s informed on the topic. “Usually Thoroughbreds or draught horses.” The other continues, scratching at the faint stubble that’s manifested on his face.

“She was special,” He agrees and then ruffles a hand through *Dice’s* mane. “Just like my best girl here. Ain’t that right?” He asks even though he doesn’t expect an answer, just to see Gale smile at him.

Maybe this whole horse-riding thing wasn’t so bad after all.

In retrospect, this might have been a bad idea. Because now, as he sits on the fence with Ben, he’s forced to observe Buck bonding with a ten-year-old girl over *Dice* as he teacher her to ride and being the perfect – well, *everything*, but mostly in Bucky's brain, the perfect *father*.

“For God’s sake, man, pick yourself off the ground.” Ben hisses, smacking him on the back.

“I’m sorry, this is just-” He waves a hand briefly to the scene in front of him, to where Buck is holding little Emma’s hand because she’s scared of being so far off the ground. “It’s a lot.”

“Gee, if I’d known you’d be suffering so much, I wouldn’t have brought Em over.” Ben cackles, throwing his head back and laughing at John’s misery.

“How’s one man so good at everything?” He sighs, crossing his arms over his chest in a petulant manner.

“There has to be something he’s bad at.” Ben pulls out a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and John raises an eyebrow at that, not saying anything in disapproval because that would be hypocritical, but not exactly approving either. He still takes a smoke when one is offered to him.

“He’s terrible at talking about his problems,” He sneers, only a little resentful. Yesterday was as closest they’d ever come to talking about all that happened, about what was bothering Gale.

Ben hums, inhaling smoke and fighting back a cough under John’s critical gaze. “That why he’s here?”

He shrugs, “I’d know if he’d just tell me.”

“You old people,” Ben scoffs and John squawks, offended at the reminder of his age.

“I’m not old, you little bastard.” Scowling, he turns back to watching Gale help Emma down from the horse. The Girl is laughing and then she lunges up to hug Buck who bends down at the waist to accept her. He picks the kid up and shifts her to one arm, the other hand leading *Dice* towards them.

“He *is* handsome, I’ll give you that.” Ben nods sagely, as if he’s only noticing it when John had seen the kid blush under Buck’s praise before.

He rolls his eyes, “So honored to have your approval, kid.”

“You should be! I don’t just hand that out to everyone.” Ben throws his head back with a cackle that just makes him inhale more smoke

and causes a coughing fit.

“Gimmie that,” He snatches the cigarette out of Ben’s mouth and puts it out on the fence, pocketing the half-smoked stick. “It’s bad for you anyway.”

Ben huffs but doesn’t say anything, turning to Emma and Gale instead. “Have fun with *Dice?”*

“She’s the best!” Emma nods enthusiastically. “And Buck’s a great teacher!”

“Hm. I think it’s all thanks to the student.” Gale taps the underside of her chin and she giggles, shaking her head of light-brown hair. Bucky can so easily envision Buck as Emma’s father that it almost knocks him down from his perch. She’s tiny and has a button nose but her eyes are just as blue as his, she could be his spitting image for all anyone else cares about.

The thought scares John shitless. Buck with a kid of his own, a loving husband and a great father, so far out of John’s reach he might as well be dead.

The nightmares hadn’t gone away even with Buck in the house, and it *was* easier to get out of the stupor they leave him in, but this thought might have just added a whole new layer of suffering to them. He’s afraid that when he closes his eyes that night he’ll see Buck and Marge with a miniature version of their mixed genes, happy without him, moving on without him.

His mood sours and he draws inwards, his good cheer gone. *This is how it should be*, he thinks, *a house with a white picket fence, two-point-five kids, man and wife. Not whatever I want.*

“Bucky?” Gale’s voice brings him back to the present and he hums, aware they’d asked him something but unable to recall what.

“Sorry, just thinking about how a ten-year-old is better at horse ridin’ than me.” He pouts exaggeratedly and Emma preens, puffing out her chest and pointing at him.

“You should listen to Buck more, then.” She says smartly and John chuckles along with the other two.

“Of course,” Nodding sagely, he hums. “I’ll have to do better if I want to catch up with you, missy.”

“Well, I have a head start and I’ll only get better.” She points out, surprisingly eloquent. “So you have to work hard!” She demands and John spares a look at Gale who’s got a fond smile gracing his lips, meeting John’s eyes.

“I promise I will.” He bows with a hand over his chest and she seems satisfied.

“Come on, Peg wanted us back for dinner.” Ben holds out a hand and Emma wiggles out of Gale’s hold. She hugs the other briefly before stomping over to John himself and tugging on his jeans to get him off the fence. He crouches down at her demand and she stares at him firmly.

“Take good care of *Dice.”* She orders and John lets her go before saluting her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ben takes her back in the truck and she waves at them from the window until she can no longer see them.

“Cute kid,” He says idly. “Don’t know if I’d want one of my own, but.” He doesn’t know why he says it. Though it might be a normal topic to discuss with your friends at one point or other, he feels like he’s just flayed himself open. That nightmare is looking more and more possible by the minute.

“Having a kid scares me,” Buck admits, eyeing John’s lit cigarette like he might be thinking of taking a drag from it. The admission is unusual in the light of what just happened, how cheerful Buck looked while teaching her.

“Yeah?” He know Gale will refuse but he holds the cigarette out anyway. Much to his utter shock, Gale takes it and puts it between his lips, closing his eyes and sucking in a drag. He doesn’t cough, doesn’t look like it bothers him at all. This is not the first time he’s done this.

“Scared I’d be like my mom,” The other shrugs, flicking the ash off the end. “Aloof, detached.”

“Buck,” He starts but the other continues before he can get anything else in.

“Or worse, like my pa’.” Gale shakes his head, a grimace on his face. The same one from the other day, the same one that’s followed by the

heavy bobbing of his throat. “Useless, too stern, too demanding. And then altogether absent. A drunk, a gambler.”

“That’s stupid.” He bursts out, moving to stand in front of Gale, taking him by the shoulders. “Don’t be a fucking idiot, *Gale*.”

“John-”

“No, shut up.” He shakes him a little and Buck’s mouth snaps closed, looking startled. “You are ten times the man your fucking *father* ever was. You’re a good man, you’re kind and patient and caring. You’re – you take responsibility, you fuckin’ care about the people around you and you’d make a great dad. Any kid would be lucky to have you as a father. So don’t go around saying stupid shit like that. I don’t want to hear it.” He’s breathing heavily by the end of his spiel and Gale’s gone all misty-eyed on him again, a timid smile gracing his features.

“You think?” The other hushes and John pulls him into a hug, holding onto him fiercely.

“I know it, man.” He sighs, relaxing into the other’s hold and pushing back against Gale’s weight in his arms. “With the way you’ve been takin’ care of me since the start, you’re as good as ready.”

“You’re a grown man, John.”

“What are kids if not our miniatures?”

“Shut up.”

The nightmare happen as predicted. It’s bad, it’s real bad but it’s not for the reason John thought it would be horrible. No.

The scene of Gale and Marge, two kids, a third on the way, a house behind them, a shining red truck in the driveway, is expected. It hurts to see, it gauges deep trenches through his insides but all he can do is stand across the street and watch. The scene is serene; Marge with an apron, calling the kids back inside where they were playing on the front lawn, Gale exiting the car with a briefcase in his hands, dressed in a tan suit and kissing Marge on the cheek as she greets him at the door. He puts a hand to her round belly and John’s perspective shifts so rapidly that he’s dizzy with it. He becomes an unseen intruder in their home, observing as Marge sets out the plates around the dining room table, everyone eagerly filing into the room for an early dinner.

He can't hear what they're saying, it's all muffled like he's under water. The kids have nondescript faces but they're both blonde, both reaching Gale's hip in height, a boy and a girl. He feels sick to his stomach watching their domestic bliss. He loses time, the dinner is over and abruptly, dream-Gale turns to him. He smiles, so, *so* gently.

I'm happy, John. Dream-Gale says in that rumbling ton of his. *Can't you see that?*

I can, he chokes out, falling to his knees for some unknown reason.

Then why are you still here? The other reaches down, cupping John's face and he can't feel the touch. He can't feel anything but the freezing cold – a frigid winter that's seeping into his bones.

If you're happy, I'm happy. And that's just it.

The scene falls apart and John wakes up with a gasp, clutching at his chest. That's what's so horrible about being tortured like this – is that John would never be able to resent Gale for living his life, for finding happiness in the American Dream. *I'm happy,* dream-Gale had said and John knew, intrinsically, that as much as it would hurt, he'd be happy for him. No matter what he's thought when drunk and bitter and alone, having Gale with him for the past few days has made him remember what it was like before.

He gets up at the crack of dawn, shuffling down into the kitchen quietly. It's the first time he's woken before Gale in a while. He goes about building a fire in the stove, heating the kitchen up against the chill in the air. He's going through the motions of making coffee and grilled cheese sandwiches when Gale finally walks in.

"Morning," He hums and glances at the other. He's wearing one of John's thick, cable knit sweaters. It dwarfs him a little, makes Bucky aware of just how much wider he is in comparison since the forest green garment is usually snug on him. He swallows, fighting the sudden dryness of his throat and looks away to preserve his own sanity.

"You're up early," The other nudges him as he passes by, grabbing the coffee John had set out for himself.

"Early bird and all that." He huffs at the theft but lets the other claim his drink.

"You? Never." Gale leans against the cabinet next to John instead of

taking a seat at the table, watching as Bucky flips the sandwiches over.

“Maybe I’m trying something new.” He flips the other off and Buck pinches his side, making him yelp.

“Don’t, you’re making me worry.” The other goes to the back door and opens it up when a loud yowling noise makes it to them. “Ah, Cara, no!” The orange menace slips inside past Gale’s legs and the other chases after her.

“Get that cat out, Buck, she has fleas!” He yells, cursing to himself and taking the sandwiches off the stovetop. “Shit.” He follows after the other and finds Gale in the living room, looking down at the cat that’s staring up at him and meowing insistently. She spins in circles, making disgruntled noises and John knows that it is immediately.

“She’s having the kittens today.” He scratches under her chin and she rubs her head against his legs, moving around the room until she finds the wicker basket he uses to bring in the firewood.

“Wanted to let me know, did you, sweet girl?” The other croons and John’s gut clenches again, his skin erupting into bumps.

“Keep her there.” He takes the stairs up two at a time until he reaches the drop ladder for the attic. He scrambles into the dusty space until he finds the box filled with old, torn sheets that he never threw out. He brings a handful of them back down and dumps them into the basket. Caramel jumps in immediately, circling inside it before settling down.

“Should we keep her inside or take her to the barn?” Gale sits down onto the ground, next to the basket so that he can per Caramel as she starts dozing.

“I’ll tell Ben to keep an eye on her.” He hums and starts building a fire in the fireplace, thinking about how cold it can get in the barn during the night. He’s not forcing the cat out there, no matter the risk of fleas.

“We goin’ somewhere?”

“Getting the truck to the shop, see about that rust problem.” He glares at the cat as she meows louder when Gale moves to stand up.

Ben’s excited about the kittens. Of course he is, he loves that damned

cat. He coos at her with such obvious affection that Bucky has to remind him to get *Dice* settled before he starts his bedside vigil.

“Want us to pick you up some food?” He offers as they’re putting on their shoes, getting ready to go.

“Nah, I’ll scrounge something up from your leftovers.” The other waves them away, not lifting his eyes from Caramel.

“Help yourself, I guess.” He snorts and Buck grins like this is something that happens often, like he’s been here for years instead of a few days. Somehow, Gale’s become comfortable in John’s home and he feels all out of sorts about it.

The man at the shop claps him on the back, saying he was sad to have missed him when he delivered the tires and John shrugs sheepishly.

“I wasn’t feeling well,” It’s not exactly a lie but it’s not the whole truth either.

“All good, man.” Frank pats the truck. “It’s gonna take a few days but I’ll get ‘er back to you good as new.”

“You’re the expert,” Bucky grins back, finding it curious that this man’s so invested in his truck’s good looks. He’s glad that at least someone’s taken an interest in her after years of being forgotten. It makes him optimistic about his own future prospects, no matter how dramatic.

He agrees to pay once the truck’s all done and they exit the shop. He takes Buck to lunch at a bar that serves sloppy burgers and stale fries but has the best burger sauce this side of Lake Michigan.

Gale’s talking idly about Caramel and trying to find a home for the kittens again. Taking charge of the situation even though it’s not his job to do that anymore – *again*.

He’s paying the bill when he hears it, the worst thing he probably could hear these days: his full name, said with a tone of surprise.

“John Egan?”

He winces and sees, with the corner of his eye, Buck squaring up next to him. He turns, ever so slowly, dreading what he’ll find there.

Oh – *oh*, it’s worse than he could have imagined.

“It *is* you!” The man bounds to him, arms out and enveloping him in a hug that he returns gingerly, awkwardly.

“Hey, man. It’s been a long time.” He extracts himself from the hug and feels how his stomach has clenched up.

“I’ll say! Maria told me she saw you ‘round town but I didn’t know where you were staying. You look good, healthy!” The man’s still holding his shoulders, looking him up and down.

“Who’s your friend, Bucky?” Buck pipes up and the friend in question jolts, eyes drawn over John’s shoulder.

“Oh, where are my manners.” Bypassing John entirely, the *friend* shakes hands with Gale. “Name’s Buck.”

Gale’s eyes widen and John’s stomach drops out his ass.

The thing is: back during basic, when John had been grappling for a way to approach the other, he hadn’t technically *lied* about knowing a guy that looked like Gale. But being faced with the two of them side by side now, he’s reminded avidly just how untrue that statement actually was. In the general sense, sure – the hair color, the eye color, the nose shape – but *Buck-from-Manitowoc* is tall and broad, eye sockets slightly sunken, mouth thin and flat. Where Gale is calm and pleasant, *Manitowoc-Buck* is exuberant, always smiling a crooked smile. The same grin that had always charmed John effortlessly.

“Oh,” Gale breathes out and shakes the other’s hand politely. “Gale. Nice to meet you.”

“Not from around here, are you?” *Manitowoc-Buck* hums, patting John on the shoulder again. “Are you two busy? We should get a drink.”

It’s the worst possible thing that could have happened today for several reasons:

One*, Wisconsin-Buck* has known John for years. They practically grew up together, he knows all sorts of embarrassing stories about him.

Two, *Manitowoc-Buck* had given John the name *Bucky* on the count of John always following him around, making a mess of things and being called the other’s shadow when he didn’t know any better.

Three, even though there’s only a year of difference between them*, ManitowBuck* always made John feel like a little kid in his presence.

And four, *Buck-from-back-home* was John's first ever love, his first innocent kiss and his first heartbreak all in one.

They sit down at a bar next door, taking a booth in the back for themselves, him and Gale next to each other, *Buck* across from them.

"How long have you been back?" The other asks and John tries tapping into that well of charm and useless bravado he used to be able to use to get through polite small talk but he can't muster up the strength.

"Couple of months, not that long." He shrugs and *Buck* nods thoughtfully.

"You two serve together?" He asks and this time Gale taps his fingers against the table. The look on his face is unreadable and it makes Bucky's palms sweat.

"Sure did, the air force, flying planes." Gale volunteers the information with clipped efficiency and *Buck's* eyes widen in wonder.

"Don't say it," He hisses before the other can open his mouth, cheeks heating at what the other's about to say.

"Finally flew the coop, huh? Just like you always wanted!" *Buck* cackles and Gale twitches at the sound next to him. "You were always raving about running away. I guess it wasn't just a pipe dream."

"You two know each other long?" Gale's voice is quiet and serious, inquisitive but not giving John much. He's hard to read on a good day but right now, he's impossible – a closed book with nothing on the covers.

"Grew up on the same block," *Buck* confirms, looking at him fondly. Looking like no time's passed between them, like nothing's changed when everything has. "He was a cute kid, big ears and all."

"You're barely a year older than me," He grumbles, flagging down a waitress and ordering two beers and a coke.

Buck, the name that was originally someone else's. *Bucky,* a nickname given in jest due to a bad case of childhood idolization. *Buck,* a moniker bestowed up a new bright spot, a new well of inspiration, a budding crush. Would Gale hate it now that he knew it never belonged to John either? Would it matter since he thought it was something stolen already?

“You get drafted?” Gale asks his questions like he’s interrogating the man, like getting this information is an urgent matter.

“Nah, prosthetic leg.” He taps his knee under the table and a hollow sound rings out. “Motorbike accident a while back.”

That was a year before John signed up, a year after he stopped talking to *Buck* in order to save his own sanity. He feels bad for never reaching out, asking about it, but he’d been too – well, *hurt* to try.

“How’s Maria?” The reminder of the reason behind why he had to cut all contact sends a spike of unease through him, a long-forgotten pain, the echoes of grief.

“Good, good.” *Buck* smiles softly, “I finally popped the question, she said yes. Wedding’s next year.”

“Congratulations, man. It was about time.” He hums, thinking back to his first time seeing them together, to the first time he realized that he never even stood a chance, that *Buck* wasn’t like him. He’d cried for so long and so hard that night, wishing he was anywhere else but in his bed, forced to see *Buck* again tomorrow and act like his heart hadn’t been crushed in a well-manicured fist.

“That’s what my ma’ said, too!” The other grins, biting his bottom lip to hold back his excitement and John’s fifteen again for the briefest moment, face full of freckles, nose too big for his face, hopelessly pining after his best friend.

Ah, fuck. He thinks, sweating under his jacket. *I’m right back where I fucking started.*

They catch up.

Buck shares story after embarrassing story about John making a fool of himself with Gale and John can *feel* some sort of realization dawn on him. He doesn’t know what exactly it’s about but he knows it’s nothing good.

And *Buck* still talks about him with such fondness, such joy when he regales their misadventures to the other. The time he broke his arm falling out of a tree trying to get *Buck* the best peaches, the time they got chased out of a junkyard by a pack of stray dogs while trying to find spare parts to fix up *Buck’s* bike, the time they skinny dipped in Lake Michigan when they were supposed to be in school because *Buck* had a test, the time Bucky knocked a kid flat on his ass for calling

Buck a –

Even after years of radio silence on John's end, after going through hell with his injury and recovery, *Buck's* still as friendly and warm as ever.

The sun goes down, and Gale's still asking questions and *Buck's* still all too eager to answer. Eventually, though, *Buck* looks at his wristwatch and winces.

"Shit, I was supposed to be home hours ago." The other slaps a bill down onto the table and then holds a hand out to the both of them, cordial. "It's been a pleasure, here, I'd like for you to write or call, Bucky. We should do this again sometime." *Buck* hands him a business card and he accepts.

"Yeah, man, sure." He pockets the piece of cardstock, smiling timidly. "It's been great. I'll see you around."

"Don't let him push you around, Gale. He's squishy on the inside." *Buck* winks and leaves in a hurry, practically running out the door.

You don't know me, he wants to scream. *You don't know who I am.*

But that's not true. *Manitowoc-Buck* is the one who knew him first, who knew him before the posturing and the drinking and the girls. He knew him when his shoes were too big for his feet and his front tooth was missing for too long. *Manitowoc-Buck* would have hated *Thorpe Abbotts-Bucky.* He would have been disappointed by the fake displays.

Gale never hated *Pissing-off-a-Fort's-wing-Bucky.* He never expected more from John than he could give. He always saw what was underneath. In a way, pre-war and after-war Bucky are the same; quieter, withdrawn, in love and anguished about it. Where *Buck* would have been disappointed, Gale just took it in stride, offered support and friendship when John needed it the most.

They've lapsed into silence, both reeling.

"John," Gale tries but John just shakes his head.

"We'll miss the bus," He pays this bill too and ushers Gale outside, heading for the bus stop in that same pregnant silence.

Ben's dozing in the armchair where he's moved the basket when they

get back. The basket now holds one considerably slimmer Caramel and three little knockoffs in varying shades and patterns of orange.

“Oh,” Buck breathes out and crouches to pat Caramel’s head, scratching his nails under her chin as she purrs.

“Ben,” John nudges the kid awake and Ben grumbles, trying to swat him away. “Come on, you know you have a room here. Don’t sleep upright like that.”

“What time’s it?” The other stretches, looking down at the cats then up towards the clock on the wall. “Shit, I have to get home. I gotta take ma’ to the doctor’s tomorrow morning.”

“Better hurry up then,” He pats the other’s head, ruffling his hair. “You can catch the last bus if you run.”

“Shit,” The other repeats before hurriedly leaving the room. “Make sure the cats stay warm and feed Cara in the morning!” The words are followed by the sound of the front door slamming shut, leaving them in silence.

John watches as Buck run his finger down the back of a white-orange little roll with barely discernable cat features and sighs.

“You wanna give them names?” He offers because he knows there’s going be no rehoming them. They’re keeping all three kittens whether John wants to or not.

“Giving them names means getting attached.” Gale points out and John grimaces.

I know, he wants to say, *if I know anything, it’s that.*

The other taps the darkest orange one, “Pumpkin.” He then moves to the one with brown-white splotches, a little calico. “Coffee.” He then looks up at John and motions to the white-orange one. “Your turn.”

“Sunny,” He says without hesitation. Naming something is staking a claim, naming something is attaching value and feelings and all sorts of other things to it. These cats are now his family. Caramel is his family. Buck Cleven is his family.

“Caramel, Pumpkin, Coffee and Sunny.” Gale confirms and John feels tired. He’s drained, he can’t think about this any longer, his head already hurts.

“Welcome to the family,” He hums and leaves the room, fully intending on getting his eight hours of sleep.

The clock on the bedside table says it’s three a.m. He’s slept for four hours and now he’s wide awake again. He rolls around in bed for a few more minutes before giving up. His throat’s parched and he needs to piss so it’s not worth putting the bathroom trip off.

Once done, he heads downstairs and almost shouts in surprise when he sees Buck sitting at the kitchen table with the overhead light flickering faintly.

“Jesus Christ, you scared me.” He shivers, moving over to put more wood into the stove. He grabs a glass and fills it up, downing it in one go. “Can’t sleep?” It’s not an unusual question, it’s not an unusual situation. This happened often in the Stalag, during basic, too. Usually, Buck would shake his head, stay where he was for a few moments and then get up and pat John on the back before going back to trying to sleep.

Now, though, there’s something in his eyes as they track John across the room. His hands are clasped in front of his face like he’s praying but John knows they’re just hiding his frowning mouth. He takes the seat across from him, palms flat against the table.

This is it, he thinks. This is what Gale’s been putting off since he got here and John can feel the air between them change when the other opens his mouth.

“Almost three months ago, I landed back in Casper after surviving the most harrowing experience in my life.” Buck starts, letting his hands drop, mimicking John’s posture. “I came home to a big, warm welcome from the Spencer family, ready to bring me back into the fold.”

This is the first time he’s mentioned Marge since he got here, John realizes. He settles back into the chair and drops his hands to his lap so that the other can’t see him fidgeting.

“For the first week I dodged questions about the war from grandmothers, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. The next week it was about the POW camp which was worse.” Buck shakes his head, tapping his fingers against the grooves in the tabletop. “Marge tried to help. She’d shout at them for being nosey and rude, but she couldn’t always be there. It got better, once the house cleared out. But then it

was just Marge an' me, and she had questions of her own that I couldn't answer."

He bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself from commenting, letting Buck get it all out instead.

"Every day I'd wake up and see she wanted to ask. I could never tell her. Not about the war, the Stalag, the march, the forest. Those we lost, those we – we killed." He swallows heavily. "And then your letter came and I was reminded that I'm not alone."

Gale chuckles then, dragging a hand over his face. "I felt *relief* even if I had to struggle to read half of it. Could tell you wrote it drunk. I reread it over and over until the corners went soft. I'd pull it out every day when Marge went to work and hid it like it was a secret. It felt like it, like I was doing something wrong." The other rubs his knuckles against his eye.

"I was ashamed of that – of the relief. Here I was, my loving fiancé and her family readily accepting me into their family and I was ungrateful enough to seek comfort in a letter. In a handful of half-legible sentences from my best friend." He huffs and John hangs onto his every word, feels like they're on the precipice of something.

He'd gotten the letter. The first one. Which means – "And the second one?" He can't stop himself from asking.

"The second one was even messier," Gale chuckles, "Really, John? Your writing's barely legible as is."

He shrugs, not bothering to explain himself because he barely remembers what was in the letter, what he said, if he embarrassed himself.

"There was a crossed-out part in that one. Took me a while but I managed to read what it said." Buck frowns. "By the second one, I was filled with so much guilt and confused that I couldn't – couldn't think about replying because it made me sick to my stomach. And then you wrote you dreamed about me dying and I just – I didn't know what to do." The other admits, sniffling lightly and John's scared that he's going to start crying again. He can't – he can't see that again.

"They're just nightmares, Buck."

For the first time, Gale flinches at the nickname. John feels like he's been shot. He feels like shrapnel pierced his hull and tore him apart

limb from limb. That's not his name, that's never been Bucky's name to give to him either and yet both of them have been defined by it in some way.

"*Buck*," The other repeats, humming. "I never believed that story, you know. Always thought you gave me the nickname to piss me off. Guess I was wrong."

"Sorry," He looks away and down at his own hands. He's picked a hangnail on his thumb raw and bloody, a nasty sight.

"Shut up," Gale grunts and waves a hand at him. "That's not – now that I know, it feels like an heirloom almost. I don't mind that it – it was someone else's name. I was always supposed to think that. And knowin' that this man you grew up with, who meant a lot to you, was its origin… it makes it more like a mantle. I'm the next Buck in line, *Buck the Second*, reporting for duty." The other smiles but Bucky bristles at that.

"Way to make me sound like a chore, bud." He closes up, crosses his arms over his chest and Buck's expression falters, mouth tightening and eyes going wide.

"That's not what I meant." The other hurries, running a hand through his hair and messing it up further. "We're getting off topic. Being your friend's never been a chore, John. I can promise you that."

He sounds dead serious when he says it, eyes firmly meeting John's and some of the tension eases out of him. There's a knot in his stomach that refuses to go away, that's squirming and making him nauseous with every twist and turn.

"Why'd you come here, Gale?" He carefully uses the other's first name but even *that* makes him twitch. John just can't win tonight.

"Will you be honest with me?" Buck counters with a question of his own and John thinks that's a stupid thing to ask. Of course he will, he'll spill his guts to the other if only he were to ask.

"Yes." He confirms, clean and simple. "Why were you confused?" They're playing some sort of game, he feels like. Only every other question gets an answer, they get to pick and choose and it's not very productive or good for John's roiling gut.

"Because I had everything I wanted, I had the beginnings of a perfect life set up for me and I was *miserable*." Gale's pained smile throws

John for a loop, makes him remember the nightmare.

But this time, instead of proclaiming his contentment, he's saying *I'm not happy, John, can't you see?*

"So you came here." He raises an eyebrow and Gale nods.

"I came to the last pace I was happy." The other sighs, putting his head into his hands. "By your side, Bucky."

And *fuck,* what is he supposed to say to that? His heart kicks up in his chest and his palms sweat. There's something to that, something to the statement that lights a fire under John's ass, that gives him hope he's not acknowledging yet.

"What was your question?" He asks, "What do you need me honest for?"

It feels like they're in interrogation again, debriefing after a mission. The only light is the bare light bulb over their heads and the flames barely visible through the gaps in the stove door.

"It was too much. The guilt, the confusion over a stupid, simple thing – two letters letting me know that you're alive and thinking about me, asking for a reply that I could never get myself to send." The other continues, picking up on an earlier train of thought, the conversation a mess – both of them too *something* to stop themselves from jumping topics.

"Were you in love with him?" Gale finally asks and Bucky startles in his seat, back snapping straight and to attention – the reflex to deny, to fight, to defend himself against the accusation. But this is Gale – Gale who sweet-talks horses and cats, who makes soup from scratch, who accepted the whole Croz-Rosie-Jean thing easily and without prejudice. John's never had to defend himself against him.

"Yeah," He sucks on his teeth, gut churning as he admits to one of his closest-kept secrets. Nobody ever knew. Nobody ever dared to even insinuate. "For years, yeah."

Buck nods like he expected this and stands up, motioning towards the door. "Come on."

He doesn't say anything, just follows blindly after the other as he leads them up and towards the room he's been staying in. Buck gets something from his bag then moves to John's room. In his hands, he's

holding two folded papers that look like they'd been hastily torn from a lined notebook.

"I wrote you letters. Sick to my stomach, I wrote them. Even though I felt like I was betraying Marge with every word. I never sent them. But I still wrote them." The other hands them off and then sits on the bed, expectantly looking up at him in the dim light of the lamp in the corner.

John has to remind himself to breathe as he takes a seat next to him. He opens up the first one, hands shaking.

Dear Bucky, the other's handwriting is neat if hurried.

You seem to be writing to me under some sort of duress (influence) so I'll do my best to respond eloquently in case you don't remember what you said. I'm awfully sorry to hear about your grandma. From what you've told me, I know the two of you were close. To lose someone else on top of everything else can't be easy. My heart is with you. But Marge has me doing repairs on the house. You see, it takes quite a bit to be a homeowner, something's always broken or needs touching up. We painted the spare bedroom yesterday. Hope you can come stay with us sometime. I really wish you would. I wish I could be there for you in person, too, so I could help you out. I wish a lot of things I'm not supposed to.

He has to pause and rub at his face, feeling the jitters making his leg bounce up and down. He has to force himself to ease his grip on the paper, careful not to wrinkle it.

But mostly, sometimes I wish we were back in England running drills and going out with the rest of our boys. I'm not going to say hi to Marge because I don't want her to know about this letter. This is for my eyes only. But I'm sure she would have said 'hi' back.

Miss you, too!

Buck.

He takes a few more moments to reread some of the parts, to fully take in the words. It seems as if there was more Gale had wanted to write. There are ink spots where his pen had lingered for too long, little beginnings of letters that never got made into words. The guilt Buck spoke of is easily discerned from how his handwriting wobbled over the sentences stating his wishes. The sentiment of wanting to be back in Thorpe Abbotts, before the camp, is a familiar one.

John's had this exact thought countless times since he's come back, too. He's had nights when he couldn't sleep, when he ended up lying awake and rolling back the film, going through his favorite memories, through every exciting moment they've been through together while in basic and England. But to hear these words – or rather, *see* them – coming from Gale, that's what surprises him. Because all Gale would ever look forward to was going home to Marge.

Except he's here now, with John, and not in Wyoming, beginning the rest of his life.

He folds open the second one and immediately it's clear that this one was written while the other's hands weren't all that steady. Some of the words are smudged like the other had ran his hand over the page before the ink was dry. There are also parts that are completely scratched out, covered in thick layers of ink that he can't hope to read. Whatever Gale was feeling while he was writing the first one seems to have multiplied tenfold.

I have nightmares so vivid I think I'm back in the air. You're with me, I look to my right and I see s gaping hole blown through your skull. I kick and scream but I can't wake up. I have to watch you bleed out, keep flying the plane because the outcome of the war depends on me.

He shudders at the image the other's words have painted inside his brain. They're not that different than what plagues John during the night but reading that the other's also experiencing this is… He thumbs the next part that's been redacted.

I'm surprised you remember about physics considering I never saw you in any of the classes. Good luck with your neighbor, you might actually need it this time. I don't want - Something else redacted with enough force to tear the paper a little.

I think I don't want to be home anymore.

Hoping to see you soon,

Buck.

He folds both letters and reaches to put them on the nightstand. This was… insightful. To know that John wasn't alone in his struggles while adjusting to life after the war is comforting even if he never wanted Gale to suffer like he did.

"Buck," He hushes and the other gets up to stand in front of him. He

tilts his head when Gale's hands near his face. The other presses his fingers to the faint scars littering John's skin. He doesn't know where the other's getting his bravery from but he desperately wishes he could have some for himself.

"Everything important I own came here with me." Buck smiles tenderly, a shy thing that's barely lifting the corners of his mouth. "I broke it off with Marge, packed my bag and left. I couldn't do it, couldn't be that far away from the one person who – who understands. That's why I felt guilty."

John closes his eyes and focuses on taking deep breaths as the other's hands cradle his cheeks. Gale broke off the engagement. Gale came to him with everything he owns, his life packed neatly into his duffle bag, ready to either stay or move on.

"I have… missed you *so much*," He finally admits and the weight off his shoulders slides off, enabling him to draw in an easier breath. "When I didn't get a letter back – I thought you wanted nothin' to do with me anymore. Thought you'd moved on. Forgot all about me."

"Never," The other states firmly, the fingers of his right hand moving up to rake though John's messy hair. "I was trying to – to be something I'm not anymore. And not to hurt Marge's feelings but even she knew it was too late for us by the time I fessed up."

"Stay with me." Caution thrown into the wind, Bucky decides it's time to let his heart do the talking. And with everything that's been brewing between them these past few days, he's not going to be pussyfooting around the topic anymore. He doesn't think he could handle any more of that, especially now that there's a possibility he won't have to say goodbye to Gale ever again.

"I thought that's what I was doing already." Buck grins and John rolls his eyes fondly. He ventures further, becomes braver with their proximity like he's leeching some of the other's courage for himself. He rests his hands on Gale's hips, sliding fingers under the sweater the other's wearing.

"Stay for good," He amends, biting his bottom lip and worrying the skin there. He can't quite find the words, can't exactly put together everything that wants to leave his mouth. He can't afford to fuck it up now. "Stay, we'll get some livestock, start a farm. Buck, if you leave after all of this I don't think – letting you go once was hard enough."

"John," The other hushes, stepping further between his spread knees.

“Don’t – don’t worry about anyone else. You said – you said this is where you were happy, when we’re together. Shouldn’t that be enough? Please, Buck, I can’t watch you walk away from me again, broke my heart on that airstrip. I can’t-”

Plush lips on his, making the words die in his throat. The dry press is warm compared to the chill in the room and he has to fight down a whine, has to settle for pulling the other closer and tilting his head further to accommodate Buck’s bent form.

“I’m staying,” The other says when they separate. “In case that wasn’t clear. I’m stayin’. I’m not fit for living without you anymore. Not after everything, I don’t want to lose you.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” He surges upwards until they’re face to face and then he kisses Buck for all he’s worth. He kisses him like he’s starved because he is, because he’s been wanting to do this for years and now that he can, he’s not stopping.

Buck’s lips part for him without a second thought and his tongue pushes inside gently. The other’s hands drop to his neck, thumbs pressing into his pulse point, no doubt feeling how his heart is racing. His fingers tingle, his knees are weak and Buck’s mouth is warm and wet and John wants to do nothing else for the rest of his life. The other pulls back with a gasp, eyes glassy and cheeks red and John wants to take a picture, wants to paint him, *anything* to immortalize this look on him.

He gets pushed down until he’s sitting and he goes easily, letting the other do as he pleases. And it seems that Buck has an idea because John finds himself with a lapful of him. The other’s knees rest on the mattress as he adjusts until they’re pressed together and John groans.

“Buck,” He hisses, feeling the heat pooling in his gut. Embarrassingly, he thinks he might start crying. “Doll, you’re drivin’ me crazy.”

“How long, John?” Gale breathes out, nose pressed to his cheek and hands back in his curls.

“Since basic,” He’s always been honest with Buck, there’s no sense in lying now. Not when he can clearly see how desperate Bucky is for him, when he can feel it. “Since we first flew together. Since I first saw you with – *with*. And knew I could never have you. Since your first mission.”

“All this time,” Gale shakes his head, that wide-eyed look in his eyes

again, the wonder and the fondness.

“Every single day, every step, every breath, Buck.” He chuckles, pained and hot under the collar of his shirt. “All yours, all for you.”

“You never-” The other starts but seems to think better of it, seems to remember what had been stopping John from saying anything. “That’s a long time, John.”

“I’m good at keepin’ secrets,” He grins lazily, rucking up the other’s sweater and undershirt, hands finally meeting heated skin, circling Buck’s waist like he’s always wanted to.

“Tell me another,” Buck kisses the bridge of his nose, the ridge of his eyebrow, the most prominent scars. Drags his lips along his jaw and John can’t do anything other than sit there and feel the other’s explorations.

“I’m glad I got shot down.” He mumbles, making the other pause. “Because I found you again. Because I got to be with you for the worst of it.”

“Bucky,” Shaking his head, Gale pulls back some, a serious expression on his face that John wants to kiss away. He looks like he’s going to try and scold him for his recklessness, try and tell John that it wasn’t a good thing.

“No,” He insists even though Gale hasn’t spoken further. “If you stripped me down to my core, you’d only find yourself there, Buck. There’s another secret for ya. So I don’t want to hear it.”

Gale kisses him again, pushing and pushing until John’s back hits the bed. The other invades his mouth like he’s searching for said core, for his own mirror image. He surrenders to it, to the other’s whims and to his own hands mapping a path up the other’s spine. Gale’s still thin, still wiry, the scar tissue easily discerned under the pads of his fingertips. He wants to see him.

He uses the hold he has on Gale’s ribcage and scoots him back. Buck makes a noise of protest at being pushed away but John shushes him quickly.

“Wanna see you doll, come on. Off with this.” He plucks at the sweater and Buck nods. “Hm, but I do like that you’re wearing my stuff.” He admits with a cheeky grin when the other scoffs.

“You would,” Gale’s voice is muffled by the fabric as it passes over his head and then John finally has the privilege of seeing him.

“Fuck, look at you.” He breathes out reverently, hands finding their way back to his waist as if magnetized. “Prettiest damn thing I’ve ever laid my eyes on, doll.”

Buck huffs, embarrassed and blushing down his neck. He never could take a compliment. He then tugs on John’s own shirt insistently, raising an eyebrow. He obliges, letting Buck help him with it. Once the shirt is off, Gale starts meticulously cataloguing him like he’s taking inventory. Every freckle, every bump and imperfection filed meticulously under the other’s watchful eye. He can’t help but tighten his muscles, flexing and making the other grin.

“Used to piss me off,” Buck admits. “How easily you got them all to listen just by being, well.” The other waves a hand at his torso and Bucky raises an eyebrow.

“What? Jealous?”

Buck reaches for his face, gripping his cheeks and squeezes, effectively silencing him. “Never allowed myself to be."

“But if you had?” His words slightly slurred due to the other’s hold on him.

“Oh, you don’t even know, Bucky.” Gale sneers, the expression a surprise to see.

“Tell me,” He’s enthralled. He pushes the other’s hand away, cupping it in his own instead. He watches as the other fights with himself, with where to start, what to say. He’s eager to unearth another new side to Gale, to see him lose his cool even more than he already has. The heat inside his veins simmers, cloying and heady.

“I always tried to be a good friend,” Buck starts, trailing his fingers along John’s collar bones, making him shiver. “The best wingman you could want, but *God*, was it hard just sitting back and watching you dance with the dames, taking them back to theirs… I didn’t know why it bothered me at first.”

He chuckles, can’t help the amusement that he feels. It’s not something he ever saw on the other, this jealousy, but it’s fascinating. “Yeah? Wished it was you, hm?”

“Yes,” The other hisses. “Eventually. Was the only thing I could think about. And you’re so *touchy,* John. Your hands have always been all over me.”

“You never complained.” He shrugs easily, confident in his own actions now that he knows the truth.

“Do you think I’d voluntarily give that up?” Buck brings his hands to rest on top of John’s, using the point of contact to drag his palms up Buck’s own torso. He swallows, tongue feeling heavy in his mouth. He watches his own bony fingers, his reddened knuckles against Buck’s pale skin, move across the bumps of his muscles, to his ribs again and then down once more to envelop his waist. Gale sighs, a coy smile playing at his mouth. John can only imagine how dumbstruck he must look, with his parted mouth and wide eyes.

“So you’ve thought about it; this?” He needs to hear it, needs to know that it’s really something Gale wants – has wanted.

“In the… loosest of terms.” The blush returns tenfold even though Buck still looks confident.

“Let’s start slow.” He offers, sitting back up and gently tumbling Gale until he’s on his back, staring up at John instead.

“This slow for you?” Buck hushes, hands briefly flailing before settling against the sides of Bucky’s neck.

“Doll,” He purrs, letting a lazy smirk curl his mouth. “If we were going my pace, your thighs would-a already been around my head.”

“*John,”* Gale jolts up, a full body motion at the words and Bucky feels himself react in tandem.

“Lie back, let me take care of you.” He brings his mouth down to the other’s throat, pressing it against the soft skin there. His lips tingle as he drags them down over the other’s chest, taking his time, tasting, taking a perked nipple into his mouth. Gale gasps and it’s music to John’s ears. Slowly making his way to the other’s denims, he thinks about how lucky he is. How grateful.

“Always wanted to get my mouth on you,” He hums, unbuckling the other’s belt but pausing at the button. “That one of the things you’ve thought about?”

“Yes,” Gale’s hands wind up in his hair again, directing his gaze

upwards. “So mouthy, Bucky. You get so *pushy* when you drink, all that flirtin’… Wanted to shut you up sometimes, and sometimes not with a kiss.”

He doesn’t fight back the whine this time. He lets the other hear it, hear what he’s doing to John. Buck seems to like that, if the way his fingers clench in John’s curls is any indication.

“Wanted to push me around, did you?” He scrapes his teeth along where the waistband meets bare skin.

“There’s an appeal to it,” The other admits and Bucky can imagine it, can see it so clearly in his head; Gale, using that scolding tone of his, making John take it, ordering him around. He shudders; that’ll have to wait for Buck to grow comfortable with this, to get used to taking what he wants.

Though, no sense in not starting him on that path today.

“If you could do anything to me, what would it be?” He pops the first button open, pausing only briefly before easing the rest of them loose as well.

“I’m not-” Gale’s throat clicks around a swallow. “I’m not *good* at this.” The other confesses, looking uncertain when John tilts his head up again.

Humming, he tugs on the jeans, dragging them down the other’s legs, pleased when Buck lifts his hips to help. “Ain’t nobody good at *this* on their first go, Buck.”

His chest expands, body soaking in the other’s warmth. He hadn’t really thought about that – the fact that Gale’s never been with a man before. And even while John’s own fumbled encounters aren’t anything to write home about, he’s still the one with some experience.

“Well, have *you* ever done this before?” Buck’s mouth flattens in embarrassment again, staring John down.

“Yeah,” He gives a crooked smile back as the other’s shoulders hitch up.

“Oh.”

He lifts himself away from Buck’s proximity, kneeling between his legs where he’s got his jeans bunched around his thighs. “I hope that’s not

a problem?" He doesn't necessarily think Buck's noise of surprise was a bad one but he still feels the need to check.

"No, ah." The other shakes his head. "One of us should know what to do."

"We're almost thirty, baby, we would have figured it out either way." He grins, patting the skin of his hip. "Get these off, I'll be right back."

He doesn't allow himself to get distracted as he jogs down to the kitchen, cock half hard in his pants and chafing against them uncomfortably. Rifling through the cabinets, he makes a mess before finding where Gale had stashed the Crisco. He eyes the tub and winces. *Well, better than Vaseline.*

He makes it back up the creaky stairs and to his room in record time, breathing only a little heavy. He stops in front of the door, hand on the doorknob and his heart in his throat. Up until this point, it had felt like a dream, and he's almost scared that when he opens that door, Buck will be gone, leaving only John's crushed hoped behind. It's stupid – this fear of his, especially after these last few days, but it's still there.

His hand flexes and he shakes it out. No sense in delaying the inevitable, he'll either be there (likely) or he won't (unlikely). He pushes past his fears and into the room.

And Buck is there, alright. He's there, stripped down to his skivvies and sitting cross-legged in the middle of John's bed. He looks up as John accidentally slams the door closed too hard in his hurry, failing to display any ounce of charisma as he approaches.

The other eyes the container in his hands, looking skeptical. "Really?"

"A method tried and true, Buck." He promises, climbing onto the bed and pressing a brief kiss to the other's lips. Gale follows him when he pulls back and John runs his fingers through his unruly hair. "I know you'd probably like seeing my handsome mug for this but I need you on your front for me, alright?"

Buck bites his lower lip, looking like he's considering it before nodding. "Not for all of it, I hope. I do adore your mouth, darlin'." He finally graces John with a smile and he can't help but capture it in another kiss, this one deeper, more mean as he nips at that same spot the other's worried tender with his teeth.

“If you want anything, you have to ask me for it.” He reminds the other, easing him onto his front and getting a pillow under his hips. “If you at any point want to stop, all you gotta do is say so.”

“John, I ain’t gonna break.” The other huffs and Bucky can hear the eye-roll.

He grips the other’s bare waist with both hands, admiring how well his hands fit there and hums. “You know it’s not about whether I think you can take it or not, doll.”

“Fine,” The other relents, resting his head on his folded arms. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Good boy,” He kneads at the two divots above the other’s rear and Gale makes a choked-off sound that reignites the fire in John’s gut. *Focus,* he coaches himself, taking off his own pants before dragging the other’s underwear down his legs slowly.

He’s lost count of how many times he’s imagined this over the years. How he would bring himself off, thinking about his best friend, shamefully hiding the evidence under the spray of the shower, in a quiet alleyway or worse – while with another lover. And here Buck is, spread out before him and at his mercy, trusting him to do this right.

“It’s goin’ to feel weird at first but you’ll get used to it quick, I just-”

“John,” Gale interrupts him, craning his head back to stare him down. “I’ve fingered myself before.”

“Yeah?!” He clears his throat to disperse the reedy tone that had just come from it. “I mean, good. It won’t be that different then. Except for the angle and, um, stuff. You’ve… before? When?” He can’t get through the explanation without asking, itching to know, fascinated by the admission.

Buck’s blush spreads down the back of his neck and he twitches against the hands on his waist. “When, uh. When I was younger, a few time, when there was a private bathroom available.” The blonde takes in a stuttered breath, “After – after we helped with the cattle. And you touched my face in the back of that truck. If I wasn’t sure before that… well.”

“Fuck, Gale, in my bathroom, under my nose?” He whines genuinely this time, bending down and biting gently over the swell of the other’s ass cheek. “Would have helped you out if I knew.”

“Bucky,” Buck hides his face against his arms again and he doesn’t want that. He straddles the other’s waist and sneaks an arm under the other’s chest, gripping his chin and craning his head back. Gale moans at the treatment and once his mouth is open, John kisses him. It’s a rough one, he plunges his tongue into the proffered space, tangling his tongue with Buck’s. It’s messy, the angle slightly off, the exchange of spit making it wet, sloppy. He grinds down on instinct as Buck sucks on his tongue briefly, moaning a little too desperate.

John’s panting by the time they break away and he has to take a deep, shuddering breath to calm down. “Anything you want, ask for it.” He reminds the other before moving back between his legs, caressing the freckled skin of the other’s back on his way.

“Just – please, get on with it.” Gale huffs, adjusting a little where he’s lying.

“Yessir,” He presses a thumb into the meat of the other’s ass cheek, pulling it aside and exposing the other to the cool air. He sort of regrets not asking Buck to show him how he does it on his own, to tell him what he usually thinks about, but there’ll be time for that.

The sensation of grease on his fingers isn’t the most comfortable thing but as he warms it, the solid bits turn soft and malleable. He’s nervous, he realizes. He doesn’t want to hurt the other, but he also doesn’t want to coddle him. He’s also a little scared of *disappointing*.

“John,” Buck hushes, looking back around. “John – do you… do you want me to do it?”

He huffs, feeling his own face heat at how easily the other’s able to read him. “Together?”

Buck offers his hand out and John smears the grease across them, his gut clenching as Gale climbs to his knees and spreads them wider. He watches, short for breath, as the other starts with his middle finger.

There’s some fumbling and huffing involved but eventually, Buck gets a rhythm going. He shuffles closer onto his knees, pressing a palm to the other’s ass cheek, keeping him spread for his own viewing pleasure. Buck’s dick bobs between his thighs and John’s mouth waters. He uses his own slick hand to press a finger alongside the other’s, easing the other into a stretch.

“Fuck,” Buck hisses, curving his spine, pushing back into their combined motions.

“Yeah,” He grins, painfully hard in his underwear at this point. “Yeah, look at that. You’re doing so well, Buck.”

“Shut up,” Gale huffs but the thing about being knuckles-deep in someone is that you feel how they react. The other clenches at the praise, a shiver racing up his spine that John looks forward to eliciting again.

“Aw, don’t hide from me now, Gale.” He teases, crooking his finger until he finally finds what he’s been looking for. The other’s body jolts, a low whine leaving his mouth. “I want to know what you like. I want to know every single thing that gets you hot n’ bothered. Wanna know how to make you scream my name.”

“Bucky!” The other removes his hand to support himself better, leaving John to insert another finger, scissoring them in a careful but insistent motion.

“Mm, like that.” He croons, “But louder. Nobody around to hear you but me. Let it all out, doll.” Bucky instructs even though he can’t imagine Gale’s all that loud in bed. In his head, it had always been panting huffs and grunts, bitten lips and palms covering mouths. But they don’t have to hide anymore, there’s nobody here to catch them.

“John,” Gale bucks into his hand when he grazes the other’s sweet spot again. “John, I’m ready, I – I want you in me, please.”

“So polite,” He boasts like the other’s words aren’t making his cock weep, like he’s not wet at the tip at the sound. “So good. Do you want it like this, where I can grip you nice and firm or do you want to kiss me some more, gorgeous?”

“Fucker,” Gale grumbles, ineffectively trying to swat at him. “Start like this.”

“Ambitious if you think we’ll last enough for another position.” He obliges, though, and quickly shucks his underwear. He slicks his cock with his own spit, the wetness already there and the leftover grease. He hisses, the heat rushing through him at his own grip. He feels insane, feels like he’s going to lose it the moment he’s in the other.

One hand on his own length, the other keeping one of Buck’s cheeks in a firm hold, he starts pushing in slowly. He has to quickly wrap his fingers around the base, staving off the intense arousal that slams into him. Warmth and the tight clench of the other’s body making for a dangerous combination.

“Relax, Buck.” He urges, petting up his spine, digging his knuckles into the tense muscle. “Relax for me, doll, come on.” He pleads, and slowly, with several deep breaths, Buck manages to lose some of the stiffness in his shoulders.

John drapes himself over the other’s form, burying his nose against the other’s neck, worrying his teeth over the delicate skin in the crook of it. Gale’s breathing heavily now, adjusting as Bucky pushes him further, demands more.

“That’s so good, doll.” He grunts, nipping at the shell of the other’s ear, hands supporting him from crushing Buck under his weight, fisted in the sheets as Gale arches his back for him beautifully. “That’s all of me, you did so well.”

“Fuck you,” Buck bites out, a breathy laugh leaving his parted lips. “What’re you so big for?”

“Your pleasure, baby.” He tucks his thighs under the other’s, making sure to keep them both stable as he starts moving slowly. “This alright?”

“Faster,” Buck grunts, turning his head and mouthing the words against John’s cheek.

He slams his eyes shut as he gets dizzy with how the pleasure rolls over him. The glimpses of the other, the feeling of his body against John’s, the heat where he’s buried inside, the way Buck’s reaching down between his legs to grip his own hardness – it’s all overwhelming.

“John?” The other pauses, twisting his hips a little and making Bucky see stars.

“Yeah, give me a moment,” He huffs, feeling a little pathetic again. “It’s – would you be mad if I said this is a dream come true?”

“Oh,” The other hushes and then noses against the skin he can reach. “No, ‘course not. It’s – it’s a lot.”

“Thank you,” He kisses the other’s temple and then starts moving in earnest. “Thank you for letting me do this, for – for coming here. For being honest with me when I would have taken this secret to my grave.”

“Bucky!” Gale gasps, moaning as John’s pace increases gradually until

he's nudging the other with his hips, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room.

"Worship the ground you walk on," He promises, half-incoherent with everything that he can feel. "Wanna bend you over every surface in the house."

"Yeah, John – yes!" Gale echoes the moans with his own, finally getting louder.

He pulls the other up until he's only on his knees, gripping around his throat with a wide palm and holding his hip with the other. He tugs him back onto his cock with every thrust and Gale's hands bury themselves in his hair, tugging sharply every time John's hit the spot. It's fast, their skin slick with sweat, he's panting against the other's neck and Gale's drooling as John shoves fingers into his mouth to suck on. A gurgled sound makes it out of Buck, hips stuttering and nails scratching against John's scalp.

There's not going to be switching positions at this pace, he knows. But they're not in a hurry, they can do this as many times as they want. For as long as they want. Over and over again.

"Love you," The words break out of him without his explicit permission as Buck starts whining continually, high in the back of his throat. "Never letting go now."

"Good, *good!"* Buck shouts, teeth bared as John buries his own in the crook of his neck again, making red blossom in the dead of autumn. "Bucky, fuck, touch me – need you to…"

He wraps his hand around the other's weeping length, admiring the heft of it in his palm and corkscrews his hand in jerky motions as he nears his own end.

It's a race towards the end, towards that heady crest of pleasure that'll wash away all the pain and heartache, leaving him loose and satisfied. It's been too long, and it's all the better that he's here with the only person that he's ever wished for.

"John, I'm-" Buck warns just as he rubs his thumb over the head of his length and then he's coming. Spend drips down Bucky's knuckles, pearly white and warm and he smears it deliberately over the other's abs, staining his skin.

"Fuck, fuck." He pulls out hastily but carefully. He maneuvers Buck

onto his back so that he can take it all in – the flushed cheeks and glassy eyes, tousled hair and the imprints of his own fingers on soft skin.

“Beautiful,” He breathes heavily, gripping himself tightly and jerking his hand up and down in rough motions. “Prettiest doll in the world, Buck. Look at you.”

The other meets his eyes, puffy mouth pouting as he brings his own fingers to it, tasting his own mess. And there’s something in that expression, something in how he curls his tongue around nimble digits that sets John off. He’s blinded by the pleasure, a high-pitched noise entering his ears as his cock twitches and he adds to drying come on the other’s body.

Whining, he collapses next to the other on the bed, struggling to catch his breath.

Gale manages to gather his wits about him first because he turns to John and plasters himself to his side, mess and all. He grimaces but doesn’t say anything because Gale’s head on his chest is worth the mess. His heart is still pounding and the other can no doubt hear it. He feels like a teen again, giddy and elated.

“I’m happy.” He realizes, stunned by the revelation.

“Me too,” Buck looks up at him, hand cupping his cheek. “And I – I love you, too.”

“Oh, that.” He winces, smiling sheepishly. “I wasn’t going to – I wanted to wait for a better moment. This isn’t very suave of me.”

“I’ve seen you run the airstrip in your skivvies, John.” Buck rolls his eyes, “I don’t care. It was… genuine. And that’s what matters.”

“Even if it was in the middle of rockin’ your world?” With a smirk, he dodges the attempted flick to his nose. Instead, he catches the other’s hand in his own and kisses the back of it, laying both of them next on top of his heart.

“Wasted enough time, I’m more than happy to hear it whenever.” Buck promises and John kisses his forehead.

They should shower, they should get under the covers and get some more sleep. There’s still things to do tomorrow, logistics to settle, but right now, he can’t bring himself to do any of that. Instead, he remains

awake and staring at Gale's long lashes as they flutter, the other slowly succumbing to sleep.

The pounding on his door is loud enough that it startles him awake from his restful slumber. He looks around, disoriented and notices that there's a warmth along his back, Buck tucked up against him.

"Shit," He mumbles, fumbling around in search of his sleep pants. He manages to find the flannels on the ground and tugs them up before stumbling towards the door and shivering at the cold air in the room.

"Hey, there you are, your-" Ben's voice cuts off, a palm slapped over his own mouth as he gapes at John's bare chest then over his shoulder to where a Buck-shaped lump is sleeping under the covers.

"Ah," He's wide-awake suddenly, alarmed at himself for not even checking who it was before answering the door.

"Congratulations, um." Ben squeaks, looking down with a blush. "Your sister's here to see you."

"Shit!" He jolts back quickly towards the bed to shake Buck awake. "Buck, baby, come on. Up and at 'em."

"Whuzzit?" The other groans, trying and failing to push him away.

"Time to meet the family." He watches as the other's eyes snap open, fear clear in the blue of them.

"What?"

"Get dressed, go." He pushes and then turns to rifle through his own closet. "Can you distract her?" He asks Ben who's still lingering by the door.

"Yeah, sure. I'll show her the cats." Ben presses his mouth into a thin line before nodding to him again. "Hurry up, though."

"Hey." Buck, sleep-rumpled as he is, pulls him into a quick kiss before squeezing his hand firmly. "I'll come down after you. Go."

"Yeah. Yes." The kiss leaves him a little breathless, a little amazes, but he manages to locate a fresh sweater that'll mask the scent of stale sweat that's clinging to him after a few moments.

"Mission time." With a mutter and more bravery than this whole

ordeal should require, he descends the stairs.

He sits across from his sister in the kitchen and doesn't say a damn thing as she stares at him, reading him like an open book despite all those years they've spent apart. There's something about the women in his family and just *knowing* when shit wasn't right.

"You've got a guest over." It's a non-question. The answer to it is obvious – the extra jacket, too small for him, the pair of boots by the door, the two mugs in the sink. Someone's very clearly been living here with John.

"Yeah." He swallows a sip of the coffee she'd gone and made while waiting for him to get his ass out of bed. "Friend of mine from the army."

"And he's here now."

"Mhm," He refuses to elaborate, not trusting himself to say anything that wouldn't incriminate the both of them.

A knock on the kitchen doorjamb draws Marley's eyes off of John and he can tell the moment she truly comprehends what she's seeing. Gale's looking, well, *radiant*. He's all smiles and ruffled hair, a turtleneck concealing the red spot John had given him last night, as he ducks into the kitchen. Bucky winces, knowing they're not fooling anyone.

"Hello, sorry." The other apologizes, approaching the table with an outstretched hand. "Bucky didn't say he was going to be having guests. Name's Gale."

"Marlene," She shakes his hand, eyes hard and probing. "And John didn't know so don't worry about it."

"Marley decided to surprise me," He butts in, unable to leave Gale floundering in the conversation. "Brought me some books she thought I might like."

"That's kind of her," Buck smiles, going for the coffee pot. "What are they?"

"Just some classics that I've already gone through." His sister shrugs, tapping her fingers against the surface of the table. "Do you read, Gale?"

“Oh, yes.” He confirms and looks quite excited about the topic, too. John's able to relax a little as they start exchanging favorite books and authors, thoughts and quotes at a rapid pace that he can’t follow.

He is aware that he’s smiling fondly at them, that Marlene knows something’s up. Her glances between him and Buck aren’t subtle but she’s not saying anything so John’s going to keep his mouth shut as well.

Ben eventually makes his way into the kitchen as well, taking out the marble cake that he’d brought with him, courtesy of Peg. He doles out slices easily, adding his own two cents on the topic of literature and John’s chest hasn’t felt this light in years.

Eventually, after the cake’s been eaten and the coffee finished off, Marley turns to them and asks: “Are you staying, Gale?”

Buck looks down at his own hands, seeming bashful, and nods. “Yes. The home I came from… it ain’t for me anymore. After everything, I don’t… those of us who understand should stick together.”

Marley nods, satisfied by the looks of her solemn appearance. “Alright. Well, I’ll be back next week around the same time so make sure both of you have read *The Grapes of Wrath* by then. Goodbye, boys!”

She makes her exit as abruptly as she’d come to visit and they all watch her, a little stunned.

“That went well,” Ben breaks the silence and John huffs out a strained laugh.

“Jesus Christ,” Buck collapses into the chair Marlene has just vacated, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve flown missions less scary than that.”

“So,” Ben croons, a cheeky grin on his face. “Staying *for good*, then?”

Gale looks at John, eyes shining and expression painfully besotted and says “Yeah, yes I am.”

He’s happy. He’s enough, and he doesn’t have to say *goodbye* ever again.

Chapter End Notes

don’t look too closely at the timeline of John’s life events I was

just winging it
Also idk where the whole rosie-croz-jean thing came from i was going with the flow tbh shrug emoji
Welcome to the end! You made it! Hope it was worth the wait and the read, it was certainly a journey!
I'm not gonna rant abt stuff here or anything but if you have questions abt stuff feel free to ask in the comments or hmu on twt and tumble @marionettefthj
Ty for reading and i'd love to hear what you thought abt the fic! If you liked it, check out my other mota fics! And stay tuned maybe i write something new eventually too!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!